

The Reluctant Gunslinger: Hollywood in the War on Terror

Research Thesis

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### Abstract

It is not surprising news to say that movies reflect the social world in which we live in. However, they do not reflect it perfectly. While some films reflect popularly held beliefs within our society, other films seek to refract the values of filmmakers and other vested interest groups. The purpose of this thesis is to take into account the films of widespread release in American cinema that depict the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 the American public was strongly behind the president, but as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continued, social attitudes began to shift. September 11 and the war on terror were, initially, difficult topics for filmmakers but by 2006, filmmakers managed to turn the trauma of 9/11 into movies of familiar and digestible narratives. With some exceptions, the master narrative that emerged regarding the trauma of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is overwhelmingly an unreflective one, disconnected from historical and geopolitical context.

While it is enticing to dismiss film, saying, *It's only a movie*, is there any more dynamic cultural artifact than popular film? Movies may not change a country, but they contribute. They can help inflame public debate, inform, educate, and act out our fears and fantasies. Hollywood has provided American audiences with cinematic catharsis to exorcise our post-9/11 demons. Amongst the films that emerged post-9/11 the villain is undeniably evil--and usually Muslim--and the heroes are our righteous patriots. This thesis aims to analyze cinematic depictions of 9/11 and the war on terror, and through a critical lens, evaluate the film's content as well as factors that determine its success amongst American audiences. What does it mean for a country to remember? As fact and fiction have become further blurred within the sensation of "alternative facts", it is difficult to distinguish cinematic fiction from reality. This thesis argues that the cinematic revision of the war on terror has largely been rewritten as a story of American victimization and exceptionalism.

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*The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media... What films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions -- those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness.*

--Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*<sup>1</sup>

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*Lurking beneath the surface of every society, including ours, is the passionate yearning for a nationalist cause that exalts us, the kind that war alone is able to deliver. It reduced and at times erases the anxiety of individual consciousness. We abandon individual responsibility for a shared, unquestioned communal enterprise, however morally dubious.*

--Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, and Leonardo Quaresima. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Hedges, Chris. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. Perseus Books Group, 2014.

### **Introduction:**

The attacks on September 11, 2001 astonished the public as they sat glued to the repeated images of terror and carnage on their televisions. Footage of the crashing planes, people leaping to their deaths from the windows of the World Trade Center as it collapsed, and the blood stained faces of survivors and heroes filled America's living rooms on a seemingly endless news cycle of chaos and tragedy. The attacks Americans were exposed to on September 11 and the visual horrors generated were reminiscent to those who sat glued to their radios on December 7, 1941 to hear coverage of the attacks on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. "A date that will live in infamy", indeed. Both surprise assaults on American soil mesmerized the public and the connection between populace and the media became crucial to our nationwide and international unification in the face of an invading enemy. The wave of patriotism after 9/11 generated similar public support such as in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor.

Unlike the polarizing and contentious Vietnam War, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon engendered not only predominant national solidarity, but stirred the affair into a call to action. And so, the following month, with international support, the United States invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, and eighteen months later, the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. However, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continued with no end in sight, public support began to fade. The patriotic parallel that marked President Bush's first term in office--which reached its zenith with the president's landing on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* to proclaim the Iraq war won--shifted increasingly to parallels seen in the Vietnam

debacle during the president's second term in office, as Bush's approval rating fell to 22 percent at the end of his term in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

The movies produced by Hollywood after 9/11 reflect this variety of sentiment. Some films seek to encourage the warrior spirit, while other films question it, some films offer criticism towards the military and politicians, but most films try to avoid politics altogether. While it is true that mainstream films offer escapism, many American films seem centered on a desire to replicate the idea of a "just war," where military retaliation and its escalation appear not only inevitable but justified. This thesis is not about 9/11 and its subsequent wars, but about the cinematic treatment of the post-9/11 attack and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The movies discussed in this thesis are of varying quality and genre. These films contain powerful as well as mediocre performances from their actors, consist of alternating ideologies, and may be remembered as either momentous or forgettable, depending on the viewer.

Regarding the methodology of this thesis, it is necessary to observe that the cinematic rendering of the events of 9/11 and its subsequent wars are not restricted to those films of widespread release. Documentaries, miniseries, made-for-television films, and art house features no doubt hold significant artistic and cultural value in our society. However, the majority of the films I have selected to analyze are movies of widespread movie house release and operate within the mainstream realm. Whereas only a minority of American cities enjoy access to art house theatres and its films, the broad populace has admission to films of general release and their consequent DVD release. This thesis is interested in examining films intended to reach the

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<sup>3</sup> Gao, George, and Samantha Smith. "Presidential Job Approval Ratings from Ike to Obama." Pew Research Center. January 12, 2016. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/12/presidential-job-approval-ratings-from-ike-to-obama/>.

general audience of the American public and how the public interacts with and regards them. Taken into account upon film analysis is box office success, ratings, reviews, film critic's commentary, director commentary, and accolade nomination and win. This thesis is particularly concerned with box office earnings and reviews within the United States. On occasion, I have consulted film reviews by British media group *The Guardian* in order to provide a foreign perspective, acting as a counterpoint to American film critics. This thesis's scope does not include documentaries, but the fictitious rendering of events in cinema. These films are not required to be factual and questions of *what?*, *how?*, and *why?* are important to consider as these filmmakers create their narratives and characters, not bound to the truth. Whereas watching a program on the television can often be a passive or convenient act, going to the movies is intentional. *Why* American audiences chose to see *what* film and *how* they react to the film's *fiction* are critical questions to consider.

I have consulted fourteen films in this thesis and have separated them by category. They are as follows:

I: How Do You Make a Film About a Day that Played Out like a Movie?

*United 93* (2006)

*World Trade Center* (2006)

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011)

II: And So Begins the Divergence

*In the Valley of Elah* (2007)

*Redacted* (2007)

III: Whitewashing Politics

*Hurt Locker* (2008)

*Brothers* (2009)

IV: Iron Man in Afghanistan, Tina Fey and the Taliban: Hollywood Finds a Way

*Body of Lies* (2008)

*Iron Man* (2008)

*Dear John* (2010)

*Lucky One* (2012)

*Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016)

V: Signing Off: In Praise of the Warrior Spirit

*Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)

*American Sniper* (2014)

Chapter 1 examines the developments in films of widespread release portraying the events of 9/11 and those affected. One category of 9/11 films focuses on those films that attempt to tackle the day of 9/11 itself. How does a filmmaker make a movie of a day that already played out like a film? Both *United 93* (2006) and *World Trade Center* (2006) attempt this task. The second category of 9/11 films focus on the lives of Americans living in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, exemplified by the film *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011). In both categories these films are without any prior context surrounding 9/11, focusing on the event itself and the heroism of Americans.

Chapter 2 examines those films that reflect the decline of public support regarding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both released in 2007, the films *Redacted* and *In the Valley of Elah* were amongst the singular wave of films that express criticism towards the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are marked by their antagonistic tone towards the war on terror and were largely financial failures at the box office.

Chapter 3 examines films that occupy a politically neutral territory yet still tell the story of war. *Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Brothers* (2009) all shy away from making any overt political statement but ultimately depict American troops as the victims of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Chapter 4 examines films that exploit the setting of the war on terror for sensationalized effect. These films include *Body of Lies* (2008), *Iron Man* (2008), *Dear John* (2010), *The Lucky*



*One* (2012), and *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016). While these films cross various genres, they all superimpose their characters and narratives into the locale of either Iraq or Afghanistan, capitalizing on the headlines of the time and remaining nonchalantly apolitical.

Chapter 5 examines the most recent crop of films about Iraq and Afghanistan released between 2012 and 2014. *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *American Sniper* (2014) provide a further cinematic account of American victimization and seek to encourage and praise the warrior spirit. They are alike in their memorialization of American heroism as well as their tendency to rewrite accounts, even though they demand to be viewed as factual.

We have always lived in a visual society. The visual aspects of our lives have become increasingly significant in recent decades due to the widespread accessibility of cinema, television, YouTube, and the internet. However, the sheer pervasiveness of images prevents the viewer from reflecting on what they have just seen. Often, people are convinced that an event has occurred in a particular way because of the images they have seen. The validity of images is debatable but since images tend to reflect parts of the everyday world, they are less likely to be questioned and more likely to be accepted. Through films concerning 9/11 and its subsequent wars, we have been able to further acquaintance ourselves with those affected by the collapse of the World Trade Center and well as combat experiences portrayed in war films. Expanding off of documentaries and news segments, the fictitious rendering of cinema has informed Americans about their wars and what was taking place “over there”. As filmmakers create their mythologized visions of our country, American cinema, as French film theorist André Bazin

suggested, “has been able, in an extraordinarily competent way, to show American society just as it wanted to see itself.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hillier, Jim. *Cahiers Du Cinéma, the 1950s: Neo-realism, Hollywood, New Wave*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. p. 251.

## I.

**How Do You Make a Film about a Day that Played Out like a Movie?**

The collapse of the Twin Towers, the hijacked airplanes, the carnage and clouds of ash and rubble: the events of 9/11 were *truly* like a movie. As millions of people watched the attacks unfold on their television sets the constant phrase uttered by witnesses and the media was that the events seemed “like a movie.” However, the reality of the matter is that the events on the day of 9/11 truly seemed as if they were pulled out of a movie script. Robert Altman, the acclaimed American filmmaker and the director of the film *MASH* (1970) went as far as to blame Hollywood itself for September 11. “The movies set the pattern, and these people have copied the movies. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they’d seen it in a movie,” Altman told the Associated Press. “How dare we continue to show this kind of mass destruction in movies. I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it.”<sup>5</sup>

Not only did the attacks on 9/11 taken on a cinematic effect, but the responses to the events were theatrical as well. Media coverage featured cops bearing machine guns guarding the streets and all across the nation Americans demonstrated their sentimental patriotism. The media framed the tragic events through the vector of personal narratives, fixating on tales of heroism, loss, and redemption. President George W. Bush proclaimed that “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world,” an assertion that would be echoed throughout editorials across the country, without discussion behind why the attacks may have happened in the first place.<sup>6</sup> On September 20, 2001 in a speech to Joint

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<sup>5</sup> “Altman Says Hollywood ‘created Atmosphere’ for September 11.” The Guardian. October 18, 2001. Accessed April 09, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2001/oct/18/news2>.

<sup>6</sup> “The President’s Public Expression of Religion.” PBS. April 29, 2004. Accessed March 25, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/president/public.html>.

Session of Congress and the country, George W. Bush announced, “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.”<sup>7</sup> This rhetoric of self-ennoblement and moral vindication not only permeated throughout the Bush administration, but into Hollywood as well.

The repetition of Bush’s binary rhetoric of good and evil, film, and pop culture in general, cast the events of 9/11 into a digestible story of heroes and villains, “with us” or “against us”.<sup>8</sup> While many contemporary films offer escapism, the American mainstream films about 9/11 and its subsequent wars are centered on the desire to create the idea of a “just war” where military intervention and its escalation are not only inevitable, but justified. This treatment is typical. Most war and war-related films depict an “us” versus “them” mindset. In a stark divide between good and evil, America was certainly the former. Those who challenged this conviction were condemned and vilified by the mainstream media. When writer and filmmaker Susan Sontag suggested that “a few threads of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened and what may continue to happen,” Sontag was marked “a terrorist sympathizer”<sup>9</sup>.

Russ Feingold, the only senator to vote against the Patriot Act in October of 2001 and one of only twenty-three US senators who voted against the Iraq War Resolution in 2002 that gave President George W. Bush the authority to use military force against Iraq, argued that in the

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<sup>7</sup> "The President's Public Expression of Religion."

<sup>8</sup> VOA. "Bush: 'You Are Either With Us, Or With the Terrorists' - 2001-09-21." VOA. October 27, 2009. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2001-09-21-14-bush-66411197/549664.html>

<sup>9</sup> "Tuesday, and After." The New Yorker. September 10, 2017. Accessed March 25, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/tuesday-and-after-talk-of-the-town>.

aftermath of 9/11 it became impossible for anyone to disagree with the Bush administration's policies without being labelled as unpatriotic:

If Afghanistan and Iraq were linked in the fight against terrorism, then anyone who questioned the Iraq intervention was somehow questioning the pursuit of Osama Bin Laden, which of course no one was doing. If then followed, of course, that if you did not support every military venture of the Bush administration you did not really support the troops and your patriotism was doubtful.<sup>10</sup>

Given this political climate, it is unsurprising that the American film industry exhibited initial reluctance to produce films about 9/11 and the war on terror. But even more difficult, how does a filmmaker even begin to make a film about a day that played out like a movie? There are literally thousands of hours of footage that exist about the events of 9/11 and the reality of destruction and violence are concrete and can be readily accessed. No disaster in modern history has been as well documented by both the media and with amateur cameras and camcorders as the events on September 11, 2001. Although the collapse of the twin towers was staged and premeditated; the deaths, suffering, loss, and carnage captured are *real*. The horrifying images of 9/11 have entered the iconic disaster lexicon and collective memory of American history much like the Zapruder film, footage of the Hindenburg disaster, and the Challenger explosion.

Repeated ad nauseum, the images of 9/11 have lost much of their impact to shock and have been rendered abstract. The copious spectatorship we have confronted with the ceaseless footage of 9/11 has compounded itself with the psychological phenomenon of cinematic vision--the tendency for witnesses of a disaster to distance themselves from the horrors of traumatic reality by viewing events as through the lens of a camera.<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag argues that

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<sup>10</sup> Feingold, Russ, *While America Sleeps* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2012) p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> Bassil-Morozow, Helena Victor, and Luke Hockley. *Jungian Film Studies: The Essential Guide*.

the quantity of horrific images we are surrounded by makes the audience desensitized towards violence, and accounts to a fundamental state of passivity.<sup>12</sup> Here, the power of the visual image is re-asserted and widely circulated such as footage of the Rodney King beatings, photos of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal, and uploaded videos of ISIS executions. “It is the passivity that dulls feeling,” Sontag writes.<sup>13</sup> As the viewer looks at a photograph or film footage, they take up the position and perspective of the person who captured said content, often “othering” those depicted, as bluntly exemplified in viewing the Abu Ghraib pictures.<sup>14</sup> The forced perspective in viewing images, this binary alignment of “us” and “them” further magnifies the Manichean motifs in the cinematic treatment of 9/11 and the war on terror.

One month after 9/11 on November 12, 2001, top executives from Hollywood movie studios, television networks and cinema operators met with Karl Rove, the senior advisor to President George W. Bush to discuss Hollywood’s role in the war effort. In the ninety-minute meeting, film executives and Mr. Rove examined how the entertainment industry could cooperate in the war on terrorism and how exactly to begin setting up a structure to make it happen.<sup>15</sup> It was agreed on by over fifty executives and Mr. Rove that each of the studios, networks, and unions would designate one executive to act as a liaison in the effort, operating under the umbrella of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). Mr. Rove suggested

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London;New York: Routledge, Taylor Et Francis Group, 2017. p. 176.

<sup>12</sup> Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017. p. 102

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 120

<sup>15</sup> Lyman, Rick. "Hollywood Discusses Role in War Effort." *The New York Times*. November 12, 2001. Accessed March 26, 2018.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/12/us/nation-challenged-entertainment-industry-hollywood-discusses-role-war-effort.html>.

that the entertainment industry could help the Bush administration to clarify that the war is “against terrorism, not Islam”, could help issue a “call to service” to generate support for American troops, and to make clear that “this is a global conflict requiring a global response, and that it is a fight against evil rather than a disagreement between nations.”<sup>16</sup>

However, instead of working through the trauma of 9/11, the Bush administration resolved to consolidate its preeminent hegemonic status. Writing about the discerned mood of America immediately post-9/11, Joan Didion noted:

What had happened was being processed, obscured, systematically leached of history and so of meaning, finally rendered less readable than it had seemed on the morning it had happened. As if overnight, the irreconcilable event had been made manageable, reduced to sentimental, to protective talismans, totems, garlands of garlic, repeated pieties that would come to seem in some ways as destructive as the event itself. We now had the “loved ones,” we had “the families,” we had “the heroes”.<sup>17</sup>

Few films about 9/11 itself addressed the “question” of 9/11, challenging the competency of leadership and the failures that led to 9/11. The first filmmaker to do so was Michael Moore with his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but this leading film was not released until 2004. The previous year in 2003, upon receiving the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature for *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore announced, “We live in a time where fictitious election results give us a fictitious president. We are now fighting a war for fictitious reasons. Whether it’s the fiction of duct tape or the fictitious ‘Orange Alerts’ we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Didion, Joan. *Fixed Ideas: America since 9/11*. New York: New York Review Books, 2003. p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Moore, Michael. "Letter from Michael Moore." Mona Baker. November 18, 2015. Accessed March 26, 2018. <http://www.monabaker.org/?p=3288>.

While Moore's comments brought cinematic and political controversy into the living rooms of American households, most films about 9/11 make little attempt to understand the point of view that predicated the attack. Films in relation to 9/11 can be divided into two categories: (1) films that depict events on the day of 9/11 and (2) films that depict the lives of victims of 9/11 as they cope with the tragedy. Despite this distinction, much of the films made about 9/11 are thematically linked in their positive examination of how Americans handled their trauma and their loss. Films within these two categories include:

- *United 93* (2006)
- *World Trade Center* (2006)
- *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011)

Corresponding to the first category of 9/11 cinema, the big budget film *United 93* (2006) attempts to give voice and face to those aboard United Flight 93. *United 93* generated controversy over the concern that the film's release was too soon and too explicit to appropriately depict the events that happened on the flight. Director Paul Greengrass refuted this criticism in an interview saying "Why are people saying it's too soon? Like the people on that flight, we need to agree about what to do about terrorism. And I think we need to have that conversation now."<sup>19</sup> Despite its controversy, *United 93* grossed \$31 million at the box office domestically and was nominated for two Academy Awards, one for Best Director and one for Best Editing.<sup>20</sup> Roger Ebert gave *United 93* 4/4 stars calling it, "a masterful and heartbreaking

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<sup>19</sup> Lumenick, Lou. "HE ROLLS WITH THE PUNCHES – TOO SOON FOR A 9/11 MOVIE? 'UNITED 93' DIRECTOR SAYS NO." New York Post. April 20, 2006. Accessed March 26, 2018.  
<https://nypost.com/2006/04/20/he-rolls-with-the-punches-too-soon-for-a-911-movie-united-93-director-says-no/>.

<sup>20</sup> "United 93 (2006)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed March 26, 2018.



film,” writing that director Greengrass, “does not exploit... he avoids ‘human interest’ and ‘personal dramas’ and just simply watches... [we] see what people do and [we] are saddened, but [we] cannot intervene.”<sup>21</sup>

Released the same year, Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center* also received similar criticism over concerns that the film’s subject was too sensitive a topic for release. Like *United 93*, both films act as mythologized visions of American solidarity, where public servants and civilians make the ultimate sacrifice for the greater good of the nation. Attempting to recreate the events of 9/11 *World Trade Center* rewrites reality into a cinematically digestible narrative. Although considerably politically muted for an Oliver Stone film, *World Trade Center* focuses mainly on themes of courage and redemption, however, Stone does so in the context of a disaster film. Starring Nicolas Cage and Michael Pena, the film follows two Port Authority officers as they are trapped and rescued from the collapsed concourse between the two towers. The film begins with a silent montage of Cage and Pena’s characters as they awake and begin their commute to work: two working class men getting ready for their day. As Pena’s character drives into New York City in his truck Brooks and Dunn’s “Only in America” plays on the radio and the World Trade Center gleams in the early morning sun amidst the skyline. This quiet and sentimental shot establishes a comparison to the World Trade Center’s eventual crumble into destruction that the movie will later depict.<sup>22</sup>

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<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=united93.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Ebert, Roger. "United 93 Movie Review & Film Summary (2006) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. April 27, 2006. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/united-93-2006>.

<sup>22</sup> *World Trade Center*. Directed by Oliver Stone. United States: Paramount Pictures, 2006. DVD.

Stone does not intend to politicize the events of 9/11, describing his film as “very tightly connected, emotional, in the tradition of Hollywood, the tightly connected emotions of four characters. Two wives, two husbands.”<sup>23</sup> Stone uses the trope of a family in crisis and the heroic rescue narrative as potentially comforting devices to represent what many still find to be a traumatic day. At a press conference for *World Trade Center* Nicolas Cage insisted:

I really don't want to attach politics to this movie. This movie is a triumph of the human spirit, it's about survival, it's about courage, and I think trying to link it to anything else right now, would take away from what the movie is really about ... it's not a downer, you walk out feeling like yeah, angels do exist, these people are heroes.<sup>24</sup>

Even though Cage indicates the rescue aspect as the uplifting denouement to a traumatic event, it is hard to understand how a film about 9/11 is not a “downer”. However, operating within the genre of a disaster film, genre itself helps to assure a sense of safety to the audience. As film theorist Stephen Neale argues, “the existence of the Hollywood genre means that the spectator, precisely, will know that everything will be ‘made right in the end’-- that everything will cohere, that any threat or danger in the narrative process itself will always be contained.”<sup>25</sup> Audiences of disaster flicks are immersed in the pleasures of the destructive spectacle and special effects, engaging in questions of *who will survive?*

The conventions of the disaster genre were not lost on critics. On *World Trade Center*, Roger Ebert considered it an, “attempt to deal with a galvanizing tragedy” but labelled it no more

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<sup>23</sup> Halbfinger, David M. "Oliver Stone's 'World Trade Center' Seeks Truth in the Rubble." The New York Times. July 02, 2006. Accessed March 26, 2018.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/movies/02halb.html>.

<sup>24</sup> VOA. "'World Trade Center' Remembers 9/11 Rescue." VOA. October 31, 2009. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2006-08-12-voa21/315896.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Neale, Stephen. *Genre*. London: British Film Institute Publ., 1996. p. 28

than “an average TV movie” awarding it 2.5/4 stars.<sup>26</sup> British *Guardian* newspaper reviewer Peter Bradshaw called *World Trade Center* “grotesquely boring and badly acted... a shaming spectacle,” that fails to “do justice either to the global, geopolitical nightmare of 9/11 or even to its ostensible subject”.<sup>27</sup> However, despite poor reviews by critics *World Trade Center* pulled in \$70 million at the box office domestically and ranked third its opening weekend.<sup>28</sup> *World Trade Center* and *United 93* are the only films of widespread release that are direct accounts of September 11th. Despite the challenges in recreating the events of 9/11 on screen, both films portray the day of September 11 through a fictionalized and sensational narrative, confirming the account that the attacks were certainly unprovoked. As both films focus on stories of idealized martyrdom without providing context, these films ultimately reaffirm Bush’s account that the attacks were a strike against “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity” to their audiences.

In addition to the films that attempt to portray the events of 9/11, other films regarding 9/11 focus on the lasting trauma of its survivors. Released in 2011 *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* views 9/11 through the eyes of one of the tragedy’s victims. As a young boy, Oskar Schell lost his father Thomas, played by Tom Hanks, in the destruction of the Twin Towers. When Oskar finds a key left behind by his father, Oskar believes the key to be a part of

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<sup>26</sup> Ebert, Roger. "World Trade Center Movie Review (2006) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. August 08, 2006. Accessed March 26, 2018.

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/world-trade-center-2006>.

<sup>27</sup> Bradshaw, Peter. "World Trade Center." *The Guardian*. September 28, 2006. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/sep/29/actionandadventure>.

<sup>28</sup> "World Trade Center (2006)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed March 26, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=wtc.htm>.

one of their elaborate games and begins a search across New York City looking for clues in attempt to find what the key might open. On his journey Oskar meets other New Yorkers whose lives had been similarly touched by September 11. Even so, film critics argued that the character Oskar was an exercise in contrived sentimentality. The film was described by Andrea Peyser in *The New York Post* as “9/11 porn” for its cynical appropriation of cultural trauma as well as its use of the unidentified ‘falling man’ as re-envisioned in a shot of Tom Hanks tumbling from the Twin Towers in slow motion to his death.<sup>29</sup> Here, the film turns the image of the ‘falling man’, an image Mark Thompson called “perhaps the most powerful image of despair at the beginning of the twenty-first century,” into an aestheticized and opportunistic pop culture moment designed to give a tear-jerker emotional resonance.<sup>30</sup> These emotional ploys resonated with critics. Roger Ebert awarded the film 2.5/4 stars, calling the film’s plot “contrivance and folderol.”<sup>31</sup> However, Ebert reconciles, writing, “No movie has ever been able to provide a catharsis for the Holocaust, and I suspect none will ever be able to provide one for 9/11.”<sup>32</sup> Writing for *The New York Times* film review, Manohla Dargis asserts *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is about, “the impulse to drain that day of its specificity and turn it into yet another wellspring of generic emotions: sadness, loneliness, happiness.” Dargis argues that the film, “exploits familiar images, be they puppies or babies — or, as in the case of this movie, the Twin Towers — and tries to make us

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<sup>29</sup> Peyser, Andrea. “Extremely, Incredibly Exploitive.” *New York Post*. January 19, 2012.

Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://nypost.com/2012/01/19/extremely-incredibly-exploitive/>.

<sup>30</sup> “Falling Man | 100 Photographs | The Most Influential Images of All Time.” *Time*. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://100photos.time.com/photos/richard-drew-falling-man>.

<sup>31</sup> Ebert, Roger. “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close Movie Review (2012) | Roger Ebert.” *RogerEbert.com*. January 18, 2012. Accessed March 30, 2018.

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/extremely-loud-and-incredibly-close-2012>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

feel good, even virtuous, simply about feeling.”<sup>33</sup> Despite critical reviews, the film still managed to gross \$31.8 million within the United States.<sup>34</sup>



(Figure 1)<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Dargis, Manohla. "'Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close' With Tom Hanks - Review." The New York Times. December 22, 2011. Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/23/movies/extremely-loud-incredibly-close-with-tom-hanks-review.html>.

<sup>34</sup> "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close (2011)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed March 30, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=extremelyloud.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> "Falling Man | 100 Photographs | The Most Influential Images of All Time." Time. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://100photos.time.com/photos/richard-drew-falling-man>.

While there certainly are other films about 9/11, these three films grossed the highest at the box office, reaching the widest segment of American audiences. Outwardly, they appear to be an ideologically neutral, dramatization of events, however, these narrative share a conspicuous detachment from disconcerting questions of politics, history, and casualty. Neither films address questions of why 9/11 occurred, nor do they provide any background concerning American foreign policy, they simply act to illustrate American heroism and sentimental characterizations of loss. In doing so, these films reproduce an uncritical and unreflective narrative of American victimization and a pronounced disconnect from the complexities of the geopolitical arena. While it may seem unjustified to single out individual films for failing to provide sociopolitical context, they are part of an overwhelming pattern. Exhibited by these three films, a master narrative of idealized heroism, martyrdom, and victimization emerges: a pattern that extends to later films about Iraq and Afghanistan. As American audiences view these films, they encounter an insulating rendering of 9/11, where the collective narrative perpetrates beliefs that the attacks were an unpredicted assault against Western democracy, further providing rationale behind the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as endorsing sentiments of American righteousness.

Despite the inevitable factual errors that occur in fictional cinema, there lies a paradox in viewing images that depict the events of 9/11. The “seduction of 9/11 footage” lies in the fact that the images provide “access to the real”.<sup>36</sup> Although images can be manipulated, cropped, and edited, they witness something that concretely existed. While 9/11 is often likened to a movie, the

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<sup>36</sup> Jung, Berenike. *Narrating Violence in Post-9/11 Action Cinema: Terrorist Narratives, Cinematic Narration, and Referentiality*. Wiesbaden: VS, Verlag Für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010. p. 119

insertion of these real and legitimate images, such as the collapse of the Twin Towers and the “falling man”, into fictional cinema-- whose implicit state is one of fiction-- reverses the perception of 9/11 images, where the fictional spectacle in depicting the events of 9/11 becomes undisputedly real. As movie viewer seeks to be immersed in fiction, this use of iconic images in film blurs the distinction between what is *real* and what is *fiction*. We do not go to a movie about 9/11 to fulfill desires of escapism, any more than a film about the Holocaust or Rwandan genocide. In viewing the cinematic rendering of these atrocities we may attempt to reconcile their violence and cultural trauma, but the insertion of well known images confuses these fictitious recreations and our legitimate pain. Concerning this trauma, Jeffrey Alexander argues that a cultural trauma occurs, “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.”<sup>37</sup> Alexander acknowledges that while this collective trauma has its origin in the initial direct event, “its memory is mediated through narratives that are modified with the passage of time and filtered through cultural artifacts and other materializations that represent the past in the present.”<sup>38</sup>

Regarding historical moments of trauma, when Allied forces began to liberate concentration camps in 1944, the holocaust had not yet become “The Holocaust”. Initially, Nazi’s referred to the genocide as “The Final Solution” and Jews used the term “Shoah,” which means “the catastrophe.”<sup>39</sup> It was not until years later in the 1960’s that historians and writers

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<sup>37</sup> Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2010. p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 74.

<sup>39</sup> Friess, Steve. "When "Holocaust" Became "The Holocaust"." *The New Republic*. May 18, 2015. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://newrepublic.com/article/121807/when-holocaust-became-holocaust>.

began to utilize the term “The Holocaust”, a term further popularized by 1978 tv-film *Holocaust*, starring Meryl Streep, that pushed the appellation into widespread use.<sup>40</sup> The deaths at Auschwitz were not an isolated event, but a systematic part of a complex network of extermination camps that exist within the entire historiography of World War II. Yet in our current globalized world of immediacy, the events of September 11, 2001 become synonymous with “9/11” just one day later on September 12, 2001 when *The New York Times* coined the term.<sup>41</sup> In our national lexicon, the term 9/11 represents not only the four coordinated attacks of that day, but functions as “day one” in the Global War on Terror. Yet, our collective understanding of the 9/11 attacks (also further reaffirmed through its cinematic depiction) is perceived as an unforeseeable assault by radical evil exempt from contextual inquiry. Even though the term “war on terror” had been previously employed in 1984 by the Reagan administration in describing the 1983 Beirut bombings, the “war on terror” became a rhetorical moniker used to describe the military campaign launched by the United States immediately after 9/11.<sup>42</sup> It is an appropriated term that extinguishes its original meaning, further erasing its historical and political context from our collective memories.

An elementary understanding of history can debunk the belief that 9/11 was a unpreidicated attack. In his book *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, published in 2000, Chalmers Johnson not only predicted the events of 9/11, but correctly

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Keller, Bill. "Correspondent; America's Emergency Line: 9/11." *The New York Times*. September 12, 2001. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/12/opinion/correspondent-america-s-emergency-line-9-11.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Silver, Alexandra. "How America Became a Surveillance State." *Time*. March 18, 2010. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1973131,00.html>.



anticipated that world politics of the 21st century, “will in all likelihood be driven primarily by the blowback from the second half of the twentieth century-- that is, from the unintended consequences of the Cold War and the crucial American decision to maintain a Cold War posture in a post Cold War world.”<sup>43</sup> Even so, the general American understanding of the present war on terror draws its genesis to the day of September 11, 2001. Where can we find the historical origins behind 9/11? Did it begin when an American army was installed in a land held sacred by Muslims in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990? Did it begin in 1948, when the United States recognized the Jewish state of Israel? Or maybe in 1938 when Americans discovered one of the largest oil reserves in Saudi Arabia? Perhaps the radicalization of Arab militants during the Afghan Soviet War? Or the United States’ support of the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982?<sup>44</sup> These historical accounts exemplify ample foreign antagonism against America, further inflaming terrorist ideologies.

This is not to say that 9/11, by any means, was not a terrible tragedy: the deaths, pain, and suffering on 9/11 are all *real* and certainly *matter*. But in regards to the cinematic treatment of these events, the geopolitical complexities that surround 9/11 are lost. Concerning this quandary in the West’s reaction to 9/11 Slavoj Zizek wrote:

If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn [9/11], we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if we draw attention to the deeper socio political causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Johnson, Chalmers A. *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*. London: Sphere, 2000. p. 229.

<sup>44</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 9

<sup>45</sup> Zizek, Slavoj, "What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib." In *These Times*. Accessed April 10, 2018.

Post-9/11 cinema faced this predicament and in most cases, chose the side of the former. While there are independent films that attempt to consider questions as to *why* and *how* the events of 9/11 took place, their viewership is limited. The international collaborative film, *11'09"01 September 11* (2002), which includes directorial works from Sean Penn, Ken Loach, and Alejandro González Iñárritu, tells eleven different stories of those affected by the events of 9/11, but was only screened in European theatres.<sup>46</sup> Amongst the mainstream films depicting 9/11 that American audiences viewed, these films have reaffirmed the initial belief that the attacks were an unprovoked assault against American democracy. Whether it is the story of a young boy grieving over the loss of his father or the portrayal of the men and women aboard United Flight 93, these films forsake historical context, choosing to memorialize American courage, ultimately legitimizing an unreflective understanding of events.

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[http://inthesetimes.com/article/747/what\\_rumsfeld\\_doesn\\_know\\_that\\_he\\_knows\\_about\\_abu\\_ghraib](http://inthesetimes.com/article/747/what_rumsfeld_doesn_know_that_he_knows_about_abu_ghraib).

<sup>46</sup> *11'09"01 September 11*, Multiple Directors. 2002.

## II.

### And So Begins the Divergence

“We don’t seek empires. We’re not imperialistic. We never have been. I can’t imagine why you’d even ask the question.”<sup>47</sup>

--Donald Rumsfeld, in an interview with *Al-Jazeera* in 2003

“We’re an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality--judiciously, as you will--we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too.”<sup>48</sup>

--Karl Rove, 2004

“Now there are some who would like to rewrite history--revisionist historians is what I like to call them,” said George W. Bush on June 16, 2003, in response to the ongoing efforts to reinterpret and reexamine his reasons for invading Iraq, more specifically, the controversial question of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).<sup>49</sup> Bush had seen his father use the Persian Gulf War with mixed results to, in part, in attempt to end the “Vietnam Syndrome.” George H.

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<sup>47</sup> Ambinder, Marc. "How Al Jazeera Outlasted Donald Rumsfeld." *The Atlantic*. December 10, 2009. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2009/12/how-al-jazeera-outlasted-donald-rumsfeld/31587/>.

<sup>48</sup> Suskind, Ron. "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush." *The New York Times*. October 17, 2004. Accessed April 01, 2018.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>.

<sup>49</sup> "Bush Raps 'revisionist Historians' on Iraq." *CNN*. Accessed April 01, 2018.  
<http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/06/16/bush.iraq/>.

W. Bush knew that the historic view of his war would depend as much on the message as the results--as Melani McAlister argued, "The Gulf War was simultaneously a major military action and a staged media event... the United States and its allies responded with military actions that were also consciously staged with the media in mind."<sup>50</sup> Twelve years later, desperate to prevent Iraq from becoming his own "Vietnam", George W. Bush employed Old West rhetoric and frontier folkisms to help frame the argument. He described terrorists as irrational boasting "Bring 'em on!", called for the capture of Osama Bin Laden "Wanted: Dead or Alive" and portrayed the United States as a reluctant gunslinger forced by circumstances to resort to violence: a defensive struggle to protect civilization against the forces of savagery.<sup>51</sup> The elementary battle of good vs. bad from the Westerns of Bush's youth act as an appropriate metaphor for how Bush initially styled his public image and his attempt to craft the nation's moral campaign.

Soon after the September 11 attacks, in a moment of national unity, George W. Bush's approval rating reached a high of 86 percent.<sup>52</sup> As the war in Iraq continued on, Bruce Bartlett, a former domestic policy adviser to Ronald Reagan, told *The New York Times* in 2004, "I think a light has gone off for people who've spent time up close to Bush: that this instinct he's always talking about is this sort of weird, Messianic idea of what he thinks God has told him to do."<sup>53</sup> Bartlett went on to say:

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<sup>50</sup> McAlister, Melani. *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*, Updated Edition, with a Post-9. University of California Press, 2005. p. 239.

<sup>51</sup> Birkenstein, Jeff, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell. *Reframing 9-11: Film, Popular Culture and the "war on Terror"*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Gao, George, and Samantha Smith. "Presidential Job Approval Ratings from Ike to Obama." Pew Research Center. January 12, 2016. Accessed April 01, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/12/presidential-job-approval-ratings-from-ike-to-obama/>.

<sup>53</sup> Suskind, Ron.

This is why George W. Bush is so clear-eyed about Al Qaeda and the Islamic fundamentalist enemy. He believes you have to kill them all. They can't be persuaded, that they're extremists, driven by a dark vision... This is why he dispenses with people who confront him with inconvenient facts ... He truly believes he's on a mission from God. Absolute faith like that overwhelms a need for analysis. The whole thing about faith is to believe things for which there is no empirical evidence... But you can't run the world on faith.<sup>54</sup>

As forty democratic senators gathered for a lunch just off the Senate floor in March 2004, then senator Joe Biden began to recall a previous interaction he had with the President:

I was in the Oval Office a few months after we swept into Baghdad and I was telling the president of my many concerns -- concerns about growing problems winning the peace, the explosive mix of Shi'ite and Sunni, the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and problems securing the oil fields. [President Bush] just looked at [me], unflappably sure that the United States was on the right course and that all was well. 'Mr. President,' I finally said, 'How can you be so sure when you know you don't know the facts?' Bush stood up and put his hand on [my] shoulder. 'My instincts,' [Bush] said. 'My instincts.' [I] paused and shook [my] head. I said, 'Mr. President, your instincts aren't good enough!'<sup>55</sup>

As President George W. Bush turned to faith in his moments of uncertainty, he discovered a wellspring of power and confidence. During a press conference in 2004, in response to a question about homeland security efforts infringing on civil rights, Bush first used the word "crusade" in public. "This is a new kind of -- a new kind of evil," he said. "And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while."<sup>56</sup>

This "crusade" in Iraq waged on. Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction and an independent joint congressional commission report released in 2003 concluded that United States intelligence had zero evidence linking Saddam Hussein to the 9/11

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

attacks or to Al Qaeda.<sup>57</sup> But as the toppling of Hussein gave way to a grinding sectarian civil war, and American sentiment changed as American forces were drawn in at a high cost, with 4,486 service members losing their lives.<sup>58</sup> The share of Americans who believed United States military involvement in Iraq was the right decision fell steadily over the years. In August 2006, about three years into the conflict, Americans believed by 54 percent to 40 percent that the U.S. would succeed in achieving its goals. During that same month, Americans were almost evenly divided on whether waging the war was the right decision.<sup>59</sup> Near the end of George W. Bush's presidency in 2008, his approval fell to a low of 22 percent.<sup>60</sup>

This shift in public opinion regarding Bush and Iraq was not lost on filmmakers. As cinema reflects a variety of impulses, so began the first crop of American films criticizing the war on terror. Films that reflect this pivot towards criticism of the war on terror include:

- *In the Valley of Elah* (2007)
- *Redacted* (2007)

Released in 2007, director Paul Haggis's film *In the Valley of Elah* begins with the discovery of the dismembered body of a young American soldier, Mike Deerfield, who was on leave in the United States after completing a tour of duty in Iraq. Mike's father, Hank, played by Tommy Lee Jones (a former soldier himself), embarks on his own investigation into his son's death after becoming dissatisfied with the official one. Hank is an old fashioned patriot who, like

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<sup>57</sup> "Hussein's Iraq and Al Qaeda Not Linked, Pentagon Says." CNN. Accessed April 01, 2018. <http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/03/13/alqaeda.saddam/>.

<sup>58</sup> Drake, Bruce. "More Americans Say U.S. Failed to Achieve Its Goals in Iraq." Pew Research Center. June 12, 2014. Accessed April 01, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/more-americans-say-us-failed-to-achieve-its-goals-in-iraq/>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Gao, George.

the majority of Americans, shows a strong, initial support of the President. In the beginning of the film, Hank sees a Salvadorian janitor inadvertently hanging the American flag upside down. Hank helps the janitor, explaining to him that an inverted flag is a traditional signal of distress. The film slowly reveals that Mike was actually murdered by his own squad mates after a violent altercation at a strip club. So desensitized to violence have the young men become, that they turn on one another with shocking brutality and then attempt to cover up the crime by callously disposing Mike's body. Hank is forced to confront the fact that Mike is not the bright young boy he remembers; in fact, his squad mates referred to him as "Doc" because of his predilection for abusing Iraqi prisoners. In a separate scene, as Mike and his squadmates arrest a wounded Hajji, Mike places his hands in the wounds of the prisoner. Pretending to be a medic Mike asks, "Does that hurt?", as the prisoner answers "yes". Mike and the others laugh as he pushes his hand back further into the wound.<sup>61</sup> In many studies that emerged from Iraq this proved to be a disturbingly frequent practice: two thirds of Marines and one half of regular soldiers said that they would not report a team member for abuse and 10 percent said that they had participated in such acts themselves.<sup>62</sup>

The Valley of Elah, Hank tells us, is where David defeated Goliath. It is a fitting anecdote as director Haggis implies in the film what can happen when one fails to treat the enemy as human, as was the case with Mike and his squadmates. The film's statement about the war in Iraq revolves around what might have happened downrange and whether it had any connection to Mike's death. Though Hank's investigation produced conflicting stories it

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<sup>61</sup> *In the Valley of Elah*. Directed by Paul Haggis. Performed by Tommy Lee Jones, Charlize Theron, and Jason Patric. United States: Warner Independent Pictures, 2007. DVD.

<sup>62</sup> Ricks, Thomas E. *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq*. New York: Penguin Books, 2010. p. 7-8.

becomes increasingly evident that Mike was getting “really weird” while serving in Iraq and carried his baggage back home, as did his squadmates.<sup>63</sup> The man who killed Mike took Mike’s life in a fit of Iraq-instigated rage; his own remorse at what he had done later leads him to commit suicide. Mike’s other squadmates witnessed his murder. Since one of the men had previously worked as a butcher, the men dismembered Mike’s body and they dumped it, instead of burying the remains, because they were hungry. Their fast food receipt allowed Hank to establish a timeline, eventually leading Hank to solve his son’s murder. This scene serves to show how calloused the men have become towards killing, a direct result of the war. In a later scene, Hank reflects on a phone call he received from his son. “You gotta get me outta here, Dad,” Mike pleaded over the phone, later brushing it off: “Just nerves talking.”<sup>64</sup>

Once a proud Vietnam veteran, Hank raised kids to embrace the military, however, by the end of the film, Hank’s sentiment of military heroism is replaced by barbarism. In the film’s final scene Hank returns to the same flagpole where the janitor had incorrectly raised the flag and duct tapes the ropes so the flag cannot be taken down. As Hank drives off the camera pans to the flag, flying upside down in the breeze. The distress call is just as much about what is happening to the American troops “over there” as it is to the indifference of those stateside to the war and their soldiers.<sup>65</sup>

Roger Ebert awarded *In the Valley of Elah* 4/4 stars. “Those who call ‘In the Valley of Elah’ anti-Iraq war will not have been paying attention,” Ebert wrote. Praising the directorial work of Paul Haggis, Haggis “doesn’t sensationalize but just digs and digs into our

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<sup>63</sup> *In the Valley of Elah*. Directed by Paul Haggis. Performed by Tommy Lee Jones, Charlize Theron, and Jason Patric. United States: Warner Independent Pictures, 2007. DVD.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



apprehensions... who else [but Tommy Lee Jones] could tell the story of David and Goliath and make it sound like instruction in the tactics of being brave?"<sup>66</sup> In the film review for *The New York Times*, A. O. Scott interpreted the film as more politically driven than Ebert. Beneath the surface of *In the Valley of Elah*'s "air of irresolution", Scott writes, "is a raw, angry, earnest attempt to grasp the moral consequences of the war in Iraq, and to stare without blinking into the chasm that divides those who are fighting it from their families, their fellow citizens and one another." Calling it "compassionate," Scott writes, "is a somber ballad about young men who remain lost in a dangerous, confusing place even after they come home."<sup>67</sup> Although Tommy Lee Jones received an Oscar nomination for Best Actor and despite positive critical reviews, *In the Valley of Elah* only grossed \$6.7 million within the United States up against its \$23 million budget to produce.<sup>68</sup>

Like *In the Valley of Elah*, films dealing with the war on terror would prove to be a tough sell to American audiences, especially films that presented explicit criticism. Released in the same year, Brian DePalma's *Redacted* was criticized by the mainstream media for its anti-war sentiments. *Redacted* is a fictional account of the Mahmudiyah killings that took place in Iraq in March 2006, where a small group of American soldiers allegedly raped a fourteen year-old girl and proceed to murder her and her family members in attempt to hide the evidence of their crime. The Mahmudiyah killings were originally reported by authorities as being perpetrated not

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<sup>66</sup> Ebert, Roger. "In the Valley of Elah Movie Review (2007) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. September 13, 2007. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/in-the-valley-of-elah-2007>.

<sup>67</sup> Scott, A. O. "Seeking Clues to a Son's Death and a War's Meaning." The New York Times. September 14, 2007. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/14/movies/14elah.html>.

<sup>68</sup> "In the Valley of Elah (2007)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=inthevalleyofelah.htm>.

by American soldiers, but by Sunni insurgents. Only when one of the soldiers admitted to the crime during psychological counseling did the accurate reporting of events surface the media.<sup>69</sup>

However, while *Redacted* centers on the events of the Mahmudiyah killings, the film is more concerned with how they are mediated and received by audiences at home. Here, the process of redaction becomes the film's central motif and metaphor. Brian De Palma (director of the films *Carrie*, *Scarface*, and *The Untouchables*) confronts the relationship between spectator and screen, deviating from the long-established naturalistic aesthetic of combat films, in favor of a deconstructed narrative. De Palma alternates between a point of view video diary, camera footage of a psychological evaluation, an Arabic news channel, a videoconference, and an insurgent website. As De Palma insisted in an interview with *The New Yorker*, "The movie attempts to bring the reality of what happened in Iraq to the American people".<sup>70</sup>

The film follows a unit of American soldiers stationed at Camp Caroline near Samarra in Iraq. The soldiers are largely stereotypical characters from war films: McCoy as the good natured everyman, Blix as the bookish nerd, Salazar as the cocky and confident jokester, Flake as a brash redneck who only joined up in order to escape jail, and Sweet as the grizzled veteran Sergeant. Disillusioned by the conflict and the reasons for which it's being fought, the soldiers have all become jaded. Anyone who tries to talk about politics is silenced by loud boos and hisses of their squad mates. Soldiers refer to the Iraqis as "midget Ali Babas," "ragheads," "motherfucking haji," "sand niggers," and "johnny jihads". After an Iraqi car fails to stop at the

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<sup>69</sup> MacAskill, Ewen, and Michael Howard. "US Soldier Sentenced to 100 Years for Iraq Rape and Murder." *The Guardian*. February 23, 2007. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/23/usa.iraq>.

<sup>70</sup> Packer, George. "Godard in Iraq." *The New Yorker*. June 18, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/george-packer/godard-in-iraq>.

intersection manned by Flake, he follows the “Rules of Engagement” and shoots to kill, only later to discover that the driver and his pregnant wife thought they were being waved through rather than being asked to stop. Flake’s commanding officers congratulate him and Flake shows no remorse, describing killing Iraqis as just like “gutting catfish”. After their long promised leave is cancelled the soldiers become progressively more resentful of the Iraqi civilians they are charged to protect and the target of their frustrations becomes a young Iraqi girl who Flake presents to the rest of the unit as a “spoil of war”. When Blix tries to dissuade the unit from sexually assaulting the girl he is labelled as “gay” and a “pussy” for not wanting to go along. After the girl is raped and murdered, her family is killed and their house is burned. Flake blames the crime on Sunni and Shiite infighting. The local Iraqi community sees through this cover-up and the truth is broadcasted on local TV news, however, these reports are largely dismissed by the American media, acting as a metaphor of how Iraqi perspectives on the war have been largely disregarded.<sup>71</sup>

The unit’s crimes escalate, aggravating tensions in the area. As an act of reprisal Salazar is kidnapped and then beheaded by members of the Mujahideen and al-Qaeda in a brutal scene, filmed in almost exact replication of the beheadings of American journalists Daniel Pearl and Nick Berg.<sup>72</sup> Here, De Palma challenges our own voyeuristic appetite for violent images and criticizes our ability to disconnect from the violence perpetrated by the Iraq war, ultimately

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<sup>71</sup> Redacted. Directed by Brian De Palma. United States: Magnolia Pictures, 2007. DVD.

<sup>72</sup> Filkins, Dexter. "Iraq Videotape Shows the Decapitation of an American." The New York Times. May 12, 2004. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/12/international/middleeast/iraq-videotape-shows-the-decapitation-of-an.html>.

deconstructing beliefs of American altruism and moral certainty. In Jim Frederick's book, *Black Hearts*, a historical account of the Mahmudiyah killings, Frederick writes:

Rape and murder have been by-products of warfare since the beginnings of time. Soldiers today, however, suffer mightily under the burden of the 'Greatest Generation' mythos and the sanitization of Hollywood depictions of World War II. Yet the estimated 14,000 rapes committed by US soldiers in the European Theatre from 1942 to 1945 have been redacted from our memory in favor of sixty years of mythic-poetic accounts of a 'Good War.'<sup>73</sup>

Despite winning the prestigious Silver Lion award for Best Direction at the Venice Film Festival, *Redacted* was largely ignored by American audiences, earning only \$65,388 at the box office domestically.<sup>74</sup> Needless to say, this highly critical perspective on the Iraq war caused concern for mainstream critics. Conservative host Bill O'Reilly called the film so irresponsible that it "endangered the lives of American servicemen".<sup>75</sup> O'Reilly went further saying, "There's little doubt the film will be used by Muslim jihadists to recruit terrorists. Only elements at NBC News have supported the film so far. As you may know, NBC is the most anti-military TV news operation in the country."<sup>76</sup> Calling it "shocking, saddening and frustrating," Roger Ebert's awarded *Redacted* 3.5/4 stars. "The latest polls show that the great majority of the American public has withdrawn its approval from the war and its architects," Ebert writes, "Why should it be a mystery that the Iraqis do not love us? Did our mothers not ask us, 'How would you feel if

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<sup>73</sup> Frederick, Jim. *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death*. London: 2011. p. xx.

<sup>74</sup> "Redacted (2007)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=redacted.htm>.

<sup>75</sup> "The Far-Left, Mark Cuban and A Movie That Will Put U.S. Troops in More Danger." Fox News. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2007/11/15/far-left-mark-cuban-and-movie-that-will-put-us-troops-in-more-danger.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

someone did that to you?" Yes, they are killing us, too, but they live there, and we went a great distance for our **appointment in Samarra**.<sup>77</sup>

"Nobody likes political films," says Costa-Gavras, the Greek-French filmmaker famous for his political movies, claiming that even when he features big stars he has trouble raising money for his films.<sup>78</sup> The general lack of financial success of such films (*Redacted*, *In the Valley of Elah*) is perhaps a sign that America rejects such allegedly anti-jingoistic films, though maybe such dramas hit too close to the truth or the subject matter is too dark to be enjoyed as entertainment. These fictitious features were not popular films and films that tarnished the image of troops were especially rejected if not condemned. It is important to remember, however, that the defining movies about the Vietnam War were not made until after the conflict had ended, that is, more than twenty years after it began.<sup>79</sup> The fact that films like *In the Valley of Elah* and *Redacted* were made so shortly after the outbreak of the war in Iraq signals a shift in the way the American film industry is prepared to address these conflicts, even if they are released in a limited fashion. Regardless of their political perspective, America has yet to produce a "war on terror" equivalent to those defining films like *Platoon*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*. Perhaps the defining films of the war on terror have yet to be made -- and whether they ever will remains to be seen.

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<sup>77</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Redacted Movie Review & Film Summary (2007) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. November 15, 2007. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/redacted-2007>.

<sup>78</sup> Christensen, Terry, Elizabeth Haas, and Peter J. Haas. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2014. p. 288.

<sup>79</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 207.

Evenso, after the box office failures of films that gave voice to criticisms of the war on terror, American cinema has been steadfast in its refusal to contemplate the political and historical realities in the aftermath of 9/11. Lack of profitability, possibility of negative controversy, and the disconnect and absence of interest of the American public in the affairs of the war on terror has no doubt dissuaded filmmakers and production studios alike from creating such films. Mainstream American cinema has chosen fantasy over reality. Denial and negation are powerful historical self-defense mechanisms, but they are profoundly unable to reconcile the subject with its trauma, only succeeding in incubating the threat. As Susan Faludi argued, regarding the Bush administration's attempt to create safety and national security:

By living in a myth, we made the world and ourselves less secure. By refusing to grapple with the actual failures that led to 9/11 and by refusing to listen to the people who tried to call attention to those failures, the nation denied its citizenry any real accounting of the missteps that led to catastrophe and any real assurance that we were any better equipped to prevent or repel another terrorist attack.<sup>80</sup>

Establishing themselves as **box office poison**, the unprofitability of films that challenge and raise questions about American foreign policy and its moral preeminence in the war on terror have served as a cautionary tale to filmmakers. We love movies because we love to be entertained, but being entertained does not necessarily preclude being encouraged to think or even educated. With films that raise political and moral concerns, there is a profound desire to change the subject.

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<sup>80</sup> Faludi, Susan. *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007. p. 293.

### III.

#### Whitewashing Politics

Although the critical political films about the war on terror were financial failures, other films about the war on terror itself were still able to generate American interest, so long as they remained politically mild. Action-driven films that portrayed the broader events of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan adopting a humanistic perspective towards American troops, while shying away from a hardline moral statements, began to be released in 2008 and were better received by Americans as opposed to the politically antagonistic films released just years earlier. Films in this category are characterized by two features: (1) they occupy a politically neutral territory and (2) they focus on American troops portrayed as victims in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

These films include:

- *The Hurt Locker* (2008)
- *Brothers* (2009)

*The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow's Academy Award winning combat drama is a visceral recreation of the tour of duty of a team of bomb disposal experts stationed in Iraq.<sup>81</sup> Providing an intimate and moving insight into the traumatic experiences of American soldiers at war, *The Hurt Locker* is one of the most acclaimed war film of the era, winning Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Original Screenplay at the Academy Awards.<sup>82</sup> The film begins with a quotation from the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges: "The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug." The scene fades with the last clause visually

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<sup>81</sup> *The Hurt Locker*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Roadshow, 2008. DVD.

<sup>82</sup> "The Hurt Locker (2009)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=hurtlocker.htm>.

lingering into the next frame, which reads, “Baghdad: 2004”. The film proceeds to recognize that despite the horrors of war, there are certain men who thrive off of its intensity. The narrative is comprised of episodic vignettes, loosely connected by the fragmented lives of the deployed soldiers. At the film’s center is the heroic, yet reckless Sergeant First Class William James (played by Jeremy Renner) who replaces Staff Sergeant Matthew Thompson (played by Guy Pearce) when Matthew is unexpectedly killed off by a bomb in the film’s intense prologue.

The following scene shows Matthew’s dog tags being placed in a box with the rest of his belongings and Sergeant James, the new man, arrives. Embodying the film’s opening quote, James lives on the edge and gets a rush from his job. The sexual rush James gets is shown in a subsequent scene, after a tense diffusion successfully takes place. James marches purposely back to a waiting vehicle, gets in, slams the door, takes a hit from a water bottle, throws it to the floorboard, pulls out and lights a cigarette, lets out a rush of smoke, and exclaims, “That was good!” Should this sexual innuendo be missed, a Colonel comes up and applauds him: “You’re a wild man... How many?” James says that he doesn’t know, calling it “ungentlemanly” to keep score. The Colonel nudges him again and James answers, “873, Sir,” to which the Colonel exclaims, “Wow. You *are* a wild man. That’s hot shit.”<sup>83</sup>

James’s status is clearly established, and the tension for the rest of the movie is whether or not he will make it home. James does, as do his two other squad members, Sergeant J. T. Sandborn and Specialist Owen Eldridge, who also serve in the Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal (OED) unit. However, Sandborn and Eldridge do not get the rush that James does, as they are just doing their job. In the final bomb sequence of the film, James is tasked with

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<sup>83</sup> *The Hurt Locker*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Roadshow, 2008. DVD.



removing an explosive device locked on to the unwilling body of an innocent Iraqi civilian, operating as an illuminating metaphor for Bigelow's vision of the American role in Iraq. As James desperately tries to save the man's life, James's own life is put in further danger. James simply cannot dismantle the bomb, and the man's fate has already been decided by the internecine fighting between Iraqis, who the film suggests, put such little value on human life as compared to "us" in the West.<sup>84</sup>

Their tour of duty is finished and the three men are glad to be going home. However, boredom quickly sets in with James as he returns to his wife and infant son, realizing that the domesticity of civilian life will never be enough for him. How can changing diapers and shopping for soap compare to the adrenaline rush of bomb disposal? As James wanders through the endless aisles of a grocery store he is confronted with the emasculating potential of consumerist society. Framed by literally hundreds of cereal varieties, James is paralyzed by the excess of choices and looks even more disoriented than ever. After his trip to the supermarket, James recounts a story about Iraq to his wife: "Some guy drove this truck to the middle of an Iraqi market. He starts passing out free candies, all the kids come running up, the families and stuff. He detonates... You know they need more bomb techs." In this anecdote, violent acts are perpetrated by Iraqis on Iraqis, where children are the victims, and the Americans are cast as the discernable saviors -- the only counter to Iraqi chaos. James cannot articulate to his wife, his hunger for adrenaline and his dissatisfaction with domestic life, and so he volunteers for another tour of duty in Iraq. The last scene shows James stepping off a helicopter in Baghdad as the closing crawl reads, "365 days for Delta Company rotation."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

As *The Hurt Locker* constructs the narrative through an uncritical approach to the Iraq war, it is devoid of historical or political context. When James volunteers for another tour of duty, he answers the call to a just war -- the film focusing on the lives saved while averting the reminder of how many lives have been lost, both Americans and innocent Iraqi civilians. In the world of *The Hurt Locker*, the victims are largely Americans, in contrast to the reality of casualties, that being over 400,000 Iraqis dead as compared to approximately 5,000 Americans.<sup>86</sup>

*The Hurt Locker* promptly received universal acclaim. A. O. Scott called the film, “the best American feature film yet made about the war in Iraq.” Scott noticed that the film reserved criticism of the war but wrote of how the director handled the film's limits, “Ms. Bigelow, practicing a kind of hyperbolic realism, distills the psychological essence and moral complications of modern warfare into a series of brilliant, agonizing set pieces.”<sup>87</sup> Roger Ebert rated the film as the best of 2009, writing, “The Hurt Locker is a great film, an intelligent film, a film shot clearly so that we know exactly who everybody is and where they are and what they're doing and why.” He applauded how the suspense was built, calling the film “spellbinding”. Ebert considered Renner “a leading contender for Academy Awards”, writing, “His performance is not built on complex speeches but on a visceral projection of who this man is and what he feels. He is not a hero in a conventional sense.”<sup>88</sup> Veterans of the Iraq war faulted the film, as veteran Alex Horton writes, “the way the team does about their missions is completely absurd,” but

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<sup>86</sup> “Iraq Study Estimates War-related Deaths at 461,000.” BBC News. October 16, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24547256>.

<sup>87</sup> Scott, A. O. “Soldiers on a Live Wire Between Peril and Protocol.” The New York Times. June 25, 2009. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/movies/26hurt.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Ebert, Roger. “The Hurt Locker Movie Review & Film Summary (2009) | Roger Ebert.” RogerEbert.com. July 08, 2009. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-hurt-locker-2009>.

nevertheless, Horton still says the film is “the best Iraq movie to date.”<sup>89</sup> Despite critical acclaim, *The Hurt Locker* is the lowest grossing film ever to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards, earning only \$17 million domestically.<sup>90</sup>

Released a year later in 2009, the film *Brothers* portrays the lasting effects the war in Afghanistan has on its soldiers and their families.<sup>91</sup> When Marine Captain Sam Cahill (played by Tobey Maguire) is reportedly killed in Afghanistan, he leaves behind his wife, his two young daughters, and his grieving parents. In Sam’s absence, Tommy (played by Jake Gyllenhaal), Sam’s underachieving brother, steps in. Tommy, a good-natured ex-con hesitantly takes on a larger role in their family dynamic, reluctantly becoming a father figure to Sam’s girls. Tommy struggles to live in Sam’s shadow, especially with the added strain of his unforgiving father, an alcoholic Vietnam veteran and strict disciplinarian. However, unbeknownst to the family, Sam is not dead. He has been held captive and tortured by insurgents, Sam is even forced to kill his fellow American soldiers in order to survive. Once an open and good-humored man, Sam is now disengaged, disillusioned, and prone to violent mood swings. His concerning temperament leads him to being institutionalized, for the sake of his family’s safety.<sup>92</sup>

*Brothers* earned a higher box office gross than *The Hurt Locker*, bringing in \$28.5 domestically.<sup>93</sup> Roger Ebert wrote that *Brothers* is "Tobey Maguire's film to dominate, and I've

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<sup>89</sup> “‘Hurt Locker’ Under Military Attack as Oscars Approach.” Fox News. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2010/03/02/hurt-locker.html>.

<sup>90</sup> “The Hurt Locker (2009).” Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=hurtlocker.htm>.

<sup>91</sup> *Brothers*. Directed by Jim Sheridan. Lionsgate. 2009. DVD.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> “Brothers (2009).” Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=brothers09.htm>.

never seen these dark depths in him before."<sup>94</sup> In The New York Times review of *Brothers*, A. O. Scott noted that the film followed the template of American films made about Iraq and Afghanistan. Calling it “resolutely somber and systematically apolitical”, Scott wrote, “you can witness any kind of combat heroism or atrocity, and see unflinching portrayals of grief, trauma and healing. But you almost never hear an argument about the war itself, or glimpse the larger global and national context in which these intimate dramas take shape.”<sup>95</sup>

The common characteristic of these two films is the humanistic and sympathetic perspective in which they portray American troops. Soldiers who survive their tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan often return home injured or traumatized, if not disillusioned. They return to a country that does not understand them, a country disconnected and fatigued by their own conflicts. Even though these two films earned low box office earnings, they managed to reach a wider American audience than the politically antagonistic films discussed in the previous section. While *The Hurt Locker* and *Brothers* express mild apprehension towards American politics, they center on offering consolation to American soldiers, ultimately depicting American troops as the true victims of war. Furthermore, these films expel the misconception of the toxic genre. Films related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not obligated to be financial failures, so long as their politics are tempered.

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<sup>94</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Brothers Movie Review & Film Summary (2009) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. December 02, 2009. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/brothers-2009>.

<sup>95</sup> Scott, A. O. "Jake Gyllenhaal and Tobey Maguire Are Siblings Battling." The New York Times. December 03, 2009. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/04/movies/04brothers.html>.

#### IV:

#### **Iron Man in Afghanistan, Tina Fey and the Taliban:**

#### **Hollywood Finds a Way**

Hollywood recognized the financial implications of political films about Iraq and Afghanistan, but the war on terror does not equate unprofitability. In fact, filmmakers began to capitalize on the cinematic potential that lied buried beneath the politics of Iraq and Afghanistan. War films do not require politics, nor do they demand any kind of moral rumination from their audience. War films do more than serve as a platform for political discourse. They allow the viewer to vicariously experience with close proximity the excitement of near death, romance, and adventure -- all without consequence. Even outside of the war film-- with the fair possibility of lethal consequence-- war itself provides a certain sort of allure. Describing the celebrations in Vienna at the outbreak of World War I, Leon Trotsky wrote:

The people whose lives, day in and day out, pass in a monotony of hopelessness are many: they are the mainstay of modern society. The alarm of mobilization breaks into their lives like a promise: the familiar and long-hated is overthrown, and the new and unusual reigns in its place. Changes still more incredible are in store for them in the future. For better or worse? For the better, of course--what can seem worse to [the ordinary person] than 'normal' conditions?<sup>96</sup>

If war is the solution to the drab and dull monotony of everyday life, films depicting such combat are the titillating answer to a current circulation of dreary and cerebral film. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan gave the American film industry the chance to build on its favorite storyline, a recurrent theme from Westerns to sci-fi: the triumph of good over evil; and what better a setting

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<sup>96</sup> Suid, Lawrence H. *Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2007. p. 5

than America's war on terror, where the narrative of "us" versus "them" had already been established.

Hollywood has enjoyed a cooperative relationship with the Pentagon for decades, and to make it easier, our politicians have already framed American geopolitical conflicts with a cinematic flair. Some observers noted that when President George W. Bush celebrated the end of hostilities in the Iraq war in 2003 by landing on an aircraft carrier in a jet fighter, the resulting image strongly resembled the movie *Independence Day* (1996), in which a president flies a fighter plane to battle alien invaders.<sup>97</sup> Did this movie somehow inspire President Bush or his staff to recreate the scene and somehow profit politically from the resemblance? Or did the movie merely seek to reinforce the common stereotype of the president as a superhero-savior?

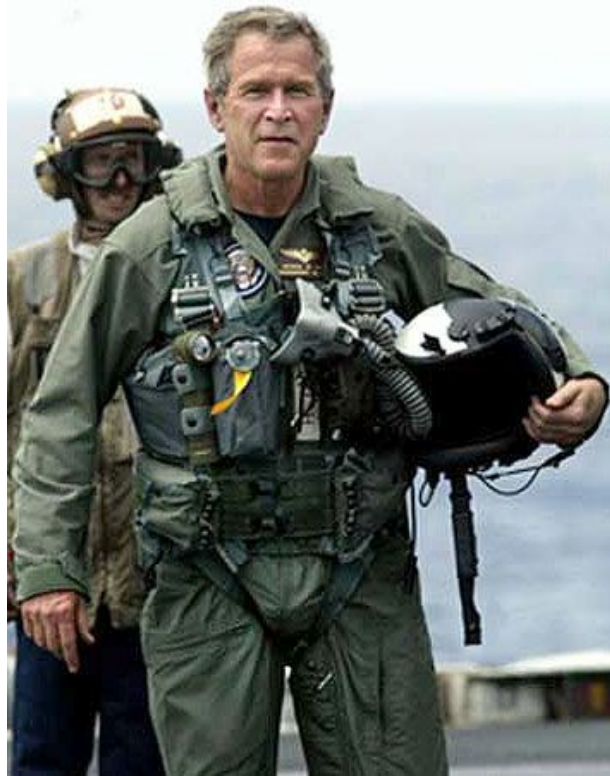


(Figure 2)<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Christensen, Terry, Elizabeth Haas, and Peter J. Haas. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2014. p. 42.

<sup>98</sup> *Independence Day*. Directed by Roland Emmerich. United States: Twentieth Century Fox, 1996. DVD.



(Figure 3)<sup>99</sup>

Political reality and cinematic fiction are easily interwoven. As actors portray politicians, some actors professionally become politicians and the distinction between the roles of actors and politicians has diminished. Professional wrestler Jesse Ventura was elected governor of Minnesota in 1999, action film star Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor of California in 2004, actress Cynthia Nixon announced her campaign for governor of New York in 2018, and actor Ronald Reagan earned the acting role of a lifetime, taking on the role as president of the United States from 1981 to 1989.<sup>100</sup> During a 1980 Republican presidential debate, Reagan uttered, “I am paying for this microphone, Mr. Green.” This line was spoken by Spencer Tracy

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<sup>99</sup> "Commander in Chief Lands on USS Lincoln." CNN. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/05/01/bush.carrier.landing/>.

<sup>100</sup> Christensen, Terry, Elizabeth Haas, and Peter J. Haas. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2014. p. 52.

as a fictional presidential candidate in the film *State of the Union* (1948). Additionally, Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative system (generally known as "Star Wars") closely resembled the "inertia projector," a defense system that "stops and destroys anything that moves" in the film *Murder in the Air* (1940), which features a secret agent played by Reagan himself.<sup>101</sup>

When George H.W. Bush said to Congress, "Read my lips," he was consciously evoking the tough-guy image of Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*.<sup>102</sup> His son, George W. Bush, in addition to his cinematic landing on an aircraft carrier, made similar use of tough-guy talk declaring the sponsors of terrorism against the United States were "wanted dead or alive", also declaring "Bring 'em on," when asked about guerrilla attacks on American troops in Iraq in 2003.<sup>103</sup> Serving as Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, when asked by a reporter whether he had gone too far when the federal government closed down over a 1995 budget dispute replied, "I learned from Sgt. Striker [sic] [the hero of the John Wayne film *Sands of Iwo Jima*, 1949] that you have to be tough on your own for their own good. That was the formative movie in my life."<sup>104</sup> Arnold Schwarzenegger did not shy away from borrowing from his movie roles while on the campaign trail. Paraphrasing from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), Schwarzenegger shouted "Hasta la vista, car tax!" as a crane dropped a weight onto a car to illustrate his promise to cut the unpopular tax.<sup>105</sup>

The power of film transfixes our political elites. They seamlessly reference movies and inject cinematic features into their political rhetoric. Neither politics nor film are created in a

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p. 51.



vacuum. As politicians can cash in on Hollywood, Hollywood has learned that box office success can be earned through the exploitation of geo-political affairs, so long as the film is not overtly political or controversial. The box office toxicity of politically controversial films like *Redacted* and *In the Valley of Elah* may have dissuaded filmmakers and production studios from creating similar films, but not all films pertaining to Iraq or Afghanistan would be a sure flop. Beneath the exhaustive politics and unattractive controversy, the war on terror contained box office gold. Manipulated properly, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were rich in the cinematic themes of ambush, rescue, redemption, Manichean evil, adventure, romance, providing taglines of “this is why we fight”. There are far more films that exploit the war on terror sensation than films that directly confront Iraq or Afghanistan. Whether in the genre of action, thriller, superhero, comedy, or romance, these films have managed to capitalize on the theatrical features of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, churning out a substantial profit at the box office. It is not to say that the American public has lost interest in these conflicts, but American interest is restrained to apolitical films, films that negate potential controversy. In doing so, the absence of political apprehension or even any historical context reaffirms our conception of a just war. Films in this category include:

- *Body of Lies* (2008)
- *Iron Man* (2008)
- *Dear John* (2010)
- *Lucky One* (2012)
- *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016)

*Body of Lies*, directed by Ridley Scott (*Gladiator* (2000), *Alien* (1979)) revolves around two different personalities within the CIA. Ed Hoffman, played by Russell Crowe, is a jaded uncaring bureaucrat in Washington who heads the agency, keeping up with pressing international affairs via satellite. In an early scene, Hoffman takes a work call in his suburban home. As his wife calls him to dinner he calls over his shoulder, “In a minute, I’m saving the world,” and Hoffman clearly believes he is. His nemesis, Roger Ferris, a young field agent, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, is culturally attuned and out on the front lines. Ferris is the one who is really saving the world. This clashing philosophies of agency opposites--the bureaucrat versus the field agent--echoes the driving dynamic behind the Jason Bourne novels of the 1980s.<sup>106</sup>

In the film’s beginning, terrorists in Manchester watch a videotape on a television that promotes random terrorist attacks across Europe. Outside, a British tactical team moves in. As the terrorists hear the incoming men, they blow themselves up to avoid being caught. The scene jumps to Ferris in the desert, rendezvousing with an Arabic informant who gives him a disc which he plays on his car system. It is the tape of Osama bin Laden, the same one being played by the terrorists in Manchester: “We will revenge the American wars on the Muslim world,” the tape says. “We will come at them everywhere. We will strike at random across Europe.” A later desert rendezvous leads Ferris to a shoot-out, as Ferris enters a hut the terrorist looks up and detonates a bomb. Ferris leaps aside barely escaping the blast. The terrorists are ruthless, they will do anything to accomplish their task, even sacrificing their own lives to their cause-- a point continuously stressed throughout the remainder of the film. *Body of Lies* is ultimately an action spy film set in Iraq and the war on terror. In the end Ferris quits the agency to stay in the Middle

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<sup>106</sup> *Body of Lies*. Directed by Ridley Scott. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009. DVD.

East. Hoffman criticizes this decision saying, “Nobody likes the Middle East. There’s nothing to like.” As Ferris walks out Hoffman shouts, “Walk out on me, means you give up on America.” Ferris responds, “Be careful about calling yourself American.”<sup>107</sup>

Both men accomplished their end goal of thwarting terrorism, but through different means. While the film does raise the question of whether or not this success is found through cultural understanding or bureaucratic prowess, *Body of Lies* is more of an action driven film that addresses the popular notion of lurking terrorism. In Roger Ebert’s review, Ebert wrote, “If you take a step back from the realistic locations and terse dialogue, Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* is a James Bond plot inserted into today's headlines.”<sup>108</sup> Regarding Ferris, Ebert described him as, “a lone ranger who operates in three countries, single-handedly creates a fictitious terrorist organization, and survives explosions, gunfights, and brutal torture. Oh, and he falls in love with a local beauty. And of course he speaks Arabic well enough to pass for a local.”<sup>109</sup> Ebert finally concludes, “*Body of Lies* contains enough you can believe, or almost believe, that you wish so much of it weren't sensationally implausible.”<sup>110</sup> A. O. Scott in *The New York Times* wrote that director Ridley Scott's "professionalism is, as ever, present in every frame and scene, but this

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Body of Lies Movie Review & Film Summary (2008) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. October 08, 2008. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/body-of-lies-2008>.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

time it seems singularly untethered from anything like zeal, conviction or even curiosity."<sup>111</sup>

Domestically, *Body of Lies* grossed \$39.3 million.<sup>112</sup>

Perhaps the most emblematic, in regards to a film narrative squeezed into the war on terror headlines of the day is the movie *Iron Man* (2008).<sup>113</sup> In the Marvel hero feature, Tony Stark, played by Robert Downey Jr., is a genius American arms manufacturer and playboy icon who sells his weapons of mass destruction to the world. At the film's beginning, Stark is an arrogant businessman pursuing global dominance through the use of his military and economic power. Since the geopolitical climate of the 2000s is a turbulent one, Stark's business is booming. "I'd be out of a job with peace," Stark remarks. Evoking Machiavelli, as Stark displays his latest death delivering missile to a cheering crowd he asks, "Is it better to be feared or respected? I'd say is it too much to ask for both?"<sup>114</sup> We learn that the patriotic Stark's father, Howard Stark, was once apart of the Manhattan Project's atomic bomb. Tony Stark suggests, "That's how Dad did it and that's how America does it!", clearly believing that he is continuing his father's legacy.<sup>115</sup>

While testing his newest advanced missiles in war-torn Afghanistan, Stark is blown up and almost killed by one of his own weapons that has found their way into the hands of insurgents. Unbeknownst to Stark, his weapons are being sold to America's enemies all over the world. Here, Stark experiences a traumatic attack forcing him to undergo a transformation,

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<sup>111</sup> Scott, A. O. "Big Stars Wielding an Array of Accents, Fighting the War on Terrorism." *The New York Times*. October 09, 2008. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/10/movies/10lies.html>.

<sup>112</sup> "Body of Lies (2008)." *Box Office Mojo*. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bodyoflies.htm>.

<sup>113</sup> *Iron Man (2008)*. Directed by Jon Favreau. Paramount, 2008. DVD.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

leading him to reconsider his role in the world--and by extension, the role of the United States. Stark laments, "I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend and protect them. I saw I had become part of the system that was comfortable with zero accountability."<sup>116</sup> However, the film's villain is not a Middle Eastern terrorist, but a misguided American patriot, Obadiah Stane, played by Jeff Bridges. It is Stane who has facilitated the sale of Stark's weapons to the world and is representative of the Military Industrial Complex that emerges as the central villain throughout the post-9/11 Marvel circulation, whether they seek to weaponize the hulk in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) or to create an intergalactic WMD in *Marvel Avengers Assemble*.<sup>117</sup> When Stark returns to America with a more humanitarian vision for Stark Industries, Stane informs the world that Stark is suffering from PTSD as result of his violent trauma, and Stane himself takes over the company.

*Iron Man* is a tale of corporate and global espionage, tying into the current of the war on terror and offering light social commentary on weapons of mass destruction. While the film warns that the United States can be destructive in its use of military force as well as manipulated by foreign states, it ultimately reaffirms its role as a necessary one. However, As Lisa Purse argues, *Iron Man*'s references to the conflict in the Middle East "are made in a superficial rather than interrogative way to add a sense of currency to the narrative."<sup>118</sup> She writes:

*Iron Man* opens in Afghanistan in order to add a modish pertinence to Tony Stark's arms dealing and his subsequent punishment. Once Stark escapes the terrorists the significant remaining portion of the film is situated in the US, apart from a brief demonstration of the Iron Man suit's powers saving Afghan civilians from terrorists, a rather simplistic bit

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 128.

<sup>118</sup> Purse, Lisa. *Contemporary Action Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. Print.

of wish-fulfilment.” This lack of interrogation ultimately depicts a character-driven fight of good versus evil, and the film fails to make any implicit political critique.<sup>119</sup>

*Iron Man* director, Jon Favreau, said in an interview with *Variety*, “It’s a redemption story. We made the story about a man who finds his heart and seeks to do justice and help others. It’s not a specifically American story. Our hero offers a simple inspired solution to these complicated times.”<sup>120</sup> Similarly, in an interview with *Empire* Robert Downey Jr. responded to the question of politics within the film: “Even if there isn’t a political dimension to it, people are gonna project one on it. I don’t see this as a bunch of limousine liberals trying to slip one past the bad guys.”<sup>121</sup> Both Favreau’s and Downey Jr.’s commentary reaffirm *Iron Man*’s politically neutral agenda, where the movie’s focus is on the character arc rather than a political critique.

*Iron Man* received largely positive acclaim. David Edelstein of *New York Magazine* called the film “a shapely piece of mythmaking... Favreau doesn’t go in for stylized comic-book frames, at least in the first half. He gets real with it – you’d think you were watching a military thriller.”<sup>122</sup> A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* called the film “an unusually good superhero picture. Or at least – since it certainly has its problems – a superhero movie that’s good in unusual ways.”<sup>123</sup> Critic Roger Ebert named *Iron Man* as among his favorite films of 2008 and

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Thompson, Anne. “Jon Favreau Keeps ‘Iron Man’ Light.” *Variety*. April 26, 2008. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<http://variety.com/2008/film/columns/jon-favreau-keeps-iron-man-light-1117984627/>.

<sup>121</sup> “Favreau and Downey Jr Talk Iron Man.” *Empire*. October 08, 2015. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/news/favreau-downey-jr-talk-iron-man/>.

<sup>122</sup> Edelstein, David. “‘Iron Man’: The Popcorn Movie as Comfort Food.” *NPR*. May 02, 2008. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90129122>.

<sup>123</sup> Scott, A. O. “Heavy Suit, Light Touches.” *The New York Times*. May 02, 2008. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/02/movies/02iron.html>.

the film was selected by the American Film Institute as one of the ten best films of the year.<sup>124</sup> It was nominated for two Academy Awards for Visual Effects and Sound Editing and ultimately grossed a mammoth \$318.4 million.<sup>125</sup>

In addition to spy thrillers and superhero franchises, romantic drama war films about both Iraq and Afghanistan were released. *Dear John* (2010) and *The Lucky One* (2012) made their way on to the silver screen amidst the deluge of other Nicholas Sparks novels adapted to film. *Dear John*, starring Amanda Seyfried and Channing Tatum, is the story of a young soldier John and his love interest Savannah who decide to exchange letters as John is deployed to Afghanistan.<sup>126</sup> Not quite differently, *The Lucky One*, starring Zac Efron and Taylor Schilling, is the story of Logan, a US Marine. While serving in Iraq, Logan finds a photo of a girl and carries it around with him as a good-luck charm. Suffering from PTSD, when Logan returns home from duty he begins a journey across America in search for the girl in the photo. Against all odds, and meeting all of our expectations, Logan finds the girl from the photograph, Beth. The film ends with Beth running after Logan, declaring her love for him.<sup>127</sup>

Neither films impressed critics and both films received negative reviews. In Roger Ebert's review, Ebert snarked, "*Dear John* tells the heartbreaking story of two lovely young people who fail to find happiness together because they're trapped in an adaptation of a Nicholas Sparks novel." The film's purpose, Ebert writes, "exists only to coddle the sentiments of

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<sup>124</sup>Ebert, Roger. "Iron Man Movie Review & Film Summary (2008) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. June 01, 2008. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/iron-man-2008>.

<sup>125</sup>"Iron Man." Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=ironmanfranchise.htm>.

<sup>126</sup> *Dear John*. Directed by Lasse Hallström. Roadshow, 2010.

<sup>127</sup> *The Lucky One*. Directed by Scott Hicks. Roadshow, 2011. DVD.

undemanding dreamers, and plunge us into a world where the only evil is the interruption of the good... as *The Hurt Locker* informs us, 'war is a drug.' It matters not. In this movie, war is a plot device."<sup>128</sup> Despite their formulaic narratives, both films earned a substantial box office gross.

Domestically, *Dear John* grossed \$80 million and *The Lucky One* grossed \$60.4 million.<sup>129</sup><sup>130</sup>

Curiously enough, or perhaps not too curious, emerged a crop of comedy films about the Iraq and Afghanistan war, including the films *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009), *The A Team* (2009), and *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016). *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016) is the story of an American war correspondent reporting in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom.<sup>131</sup> Kim, played by Tina Fey, often puts herself in danger in order to capture combat incidents. Despite the danger, Kim stays in Afghanistan for months, then years. She continues to compete with other journalists for stories and resources, only to learn that BBC correspondent Tanya Vanderpoel, played by Margot Robbie, is being groomed to replace her. Meanwhile, freelance photographer and Kim's sexual interest Iain is kidnapped for ransom. Later, in a rescue mission captured by Kim and her cameramen, Iain is successfully retrieved. Disillusioned, Kim returns to New York City, taking an on-camera desk job.

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<sup>128</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Dear John Movie Review & Film Summary (2010) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. February 03, 2010. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dear-john-2010>.

<sup>129</sup> "Dear John (2010)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=dearjohn.htm>.

<sup>130</sup> "The Lucky One (2012)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=luckyone.htm>.

<sup>131</sup> *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. Directed by Glenn Ficarra. Broadway Video, 2016. DVD



*Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* received mixed reviews. Peter Travers writing for *Rolling Stone* wrote, "There's a lot going on here. Maybe too much."<sup>132</sup> In *The Atlantic* review, Megan Garber writes, "It's a morally messy premise. Afghanistan is not Colin Firth. War is not *Love Actually*. And that is the problem with *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, which is overall a charming comedy about a terrible war."<sup>133</sup> Although initially sold as *The Hangover* set in Afghanistan, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* earned only \$23 million, the lowest gross in this category of film.<sup>134</sup>

In the post-9/11 years, films about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were of varying quality and genre. Upon election in 2008, President Barack Obama stopped using the phrase the "war on terror", eager to distance his administration from his predecessor, preferring to suggest that the United States was in "a battle or war against some terrorist organizations." Even though President Obama insisted that it was "time to turn the page",<sup>135</sup> American filmmakers refused to do so. Released between 2008 and 2016, the films we have discussed in this category have proved to be not so far removed from the Bush era. The release of these films and their financial successes--from romantic dramas to spy thrillers, comedies to superhero flicks--demonstrated that the war on terror remained of significant interest to both filmmakers and the public.

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<sup>132</sup> Travers, Peter. "'Whiskey Tango Foxtrot' Movie Review." *Rolling Stone*. March 02, 2016. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/whiskey-tango-foxtrot-20160302>.

<sup>133</sup> Garber, Megan. "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot: The Soft Bigotry of No Expectations." *The Atlantic*. March 04, 2016. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/whiskey-tango-foxtrot-the-soft-bigotry-of-no-expectations/472182/>.

<sup>134</sup> "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (2016)." *Box Office Mojo*. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=untitledtinafeycomedy.htm>.

<sup>135</sup> MacAskill, Ewen. "Barack Obama Ends the War in Iraq. 'Now It's Time to Turn the Page'." *The Guardian*. September 01, 2010. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/01/obama-formally-ends-iraq-war>.

Although these films engage with aspects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they are restricted by the demands of Hollywood and the public that they be entirely apolitical and without criticism. They exist without apprehension towards the ideologies of the war on terror while simultaneously appropriating the trauma of 9/11 and its subsequent conflicts for entertainment.

This kind of appropriation is not specific to cinema. Surrounding the events of 9/11, American culture has adopted well-known phrases into our national lexicon like “terrorists”, “sleeper cells”, “weapons of mass destruction”, and “ground zero”. Largely unobserved, the phrase “ground zero” was previously used to describe the location of the American bombings in Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945.<sup>136</sup> What are the implications of this unrecognized appropriation? Given that America perpetrated the Japanese bombings, which has subsequently been revised as necessary and just, the links between 9/11 and the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima are unthinkable to the American public, exemplifying a national lesson on cognitive dissonance. Instead of deliberating the trauma of 9/11 and the historical context of its following wars, Hollywood has instead pushed to act out America’s hegemonic status.

The romantic dramas *Dear John* and *The Lucky One* offer no political context to the wars their male protagonists are fighting for, other than a patriotic duty to serve after the 9/11 attacks. Spy-thriller *Body Of Lies* simply picks up in the heat of the war on terror. The Muslim terrorists are depicted as villainous caricatures of undisputed evil, and the only feasible way in which their heinous acts of terror may be combatted is through superior American military intelligence. While *Iron Man* briefly voices commentary about the Military Industrial Complex and weapons of mass destruction, the film ultimately lacks any concrete criticism. No more than the average

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<sup>136</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 205.

Tina Fey screwball comedy, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* is limited by its narrow worldview, casting white actors as Afghans, and not quite able to distance Fey from her familiar “30 Rock” Liz Lemon persona.

Superimposing their plots and characters into Iraq and Afghanistan, these films exploit the conflicts of the war on terror to their cinematic advantage. They capitalize on the relevant broadcasts in American news circulation in order to further extend our appetite for sensationalism. As compared to the films in categories previously discussed, these exploitative films grossed substantially higher, reaching a larger segment of the American general public. At the time of these films’ releases, the war on terror was of ample interest to Americans, so long as the film does not bash American troops or contain any distinguishable political criticism. In accordance with public interest, films about the war on terror will continue to be produced and viewed, but with stipulations. As General George C. Scott in the film *Patton* (1970) proclaimed, “Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser... the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans.”<sup>137</sup> Reverberating this American exceptionalism in regards to the war on terror, President George W. Bush advocated, “At some point we may be the only ones left. That’s ok with me. We are America.”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Suid, Lawrence H. *Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2007. p. 1.

<sup>138</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 197.

## V.

**Signing Off: In Praise of the Warrior Spirit**

The films *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper* are not only the most representative of American sentiments regarding 9/11 and the war on terror, but also the highest grossing. There have not been any war films since *American Sniper* that have been as popular or as financially successful with the American public and it appears as if Hollywood has satisfied its cinematic chapter of the war on terror, ending on a high note. These films not only praise the warrior spirit and the duty and aptitude of those who serve for the sake of national security, but like films of previous categories, depict the central victims of the war on terror as the Americans. Films in this category include:

- *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)
- *American Sniper* (2014)

Perhaps the most defining American film of the post-9/11 era in regards to the capture of Osama Bin Laden is *Zero Dark Thirty*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal (the same director and writer collaboration of the previously discussed film *The Hurt Locker*), *Zero Dark Thirty* tells the account of the decade-long manhunt for Osama Bin Laden that resulted in his assassination in Operation Neptune Spear in Abbottabad, Pakistan on May 2, 2011.<sup>139</sup> It is not unusual for filmmakers to try to inject authenticity into a movie's first frames by flashing on screen words such as "based on real events." In the case of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the film begins as the words "Based on Firsthand Accounts of Actual Events" glow on the first frame. As those words fade, "September 11, 2001" appears against a black screen over which the real-life

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<sup>139</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Columbia Pictures. 2012. DVD

voices of the victims of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 can be heard frantically calling their loved ones in the final moments before their deaths. The film opts out of portraying the actual events of 9/11, as if the event is too traumatic and already memorialized to recreate. In the scene that immediately follows is a torture sequence of a young man named Ammar al-Baluchi. The acts of torture are perpetrated by the CIA operative Daniel, played by Jason Clarke, and are observed by his fellow CIA agent Maya, played by Jessica Chastain, the film's protagonist. In this torture sequence Maya appears reluctant towards Ammar's torture, she even winces. With the interruption of other brief connected scenes, Ammar's torture takes up the first twenty-eight minutes of the film, creating a distinct correlation between Ammar and the events of September 11.<sup>140</sup>

As the film progresses, Maya embraces the use of torture and neither Maya nor Daniel doubt the legitimacy or the efficiency of torture throughout the remainder of the film. As the viewer intimately joins in on Maya's perspective, we cannot help but empathize with her, legitimizing her narrative and cause. The depiction of torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* is the film's most controversial feature, where as the film progresses, information collected from Ammar's torture eventually leads to the discovery of Osama bin Laden. Responding to this contention, screenwriter Mark Boal stated:

We're trying to present a long, 10-year intelligence hunt, of which the harsh interrogation program is the most controversial aspect. And it's just misreading the film to say that it shows torture leading to the information about Bin Laden. If you actually watch the movie, the detainee [Ammar] doesn't say anything when he's waterboarded. He gives them some information that's new to them over the civilized setting of a lunch--and they go back to the research room and all that information is already there.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibis.

<sup>141</sup> Guardian, The. "Zero Dark Thirty Director Kathryn Bigelow Defends The Controversial Waterboarding Scene." Business Insider. December 12, 2012. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.businessinsider.com/zero-dark-thirty-is-not-pro-torture-2012-12>.

While Boal is correct in his assessment that Ammar does not reveal information during the scenes in which he is being waterboarded, the “civilized setting” of lunch that Boal mentions follows immediately after a scene in which Ammar is beaten, sexually humiliated, denied food and sleep, and is forced to wear a dog collar. After, Ammar is led to the interrogation table hooded and shackled to the floor. As Ammar is again reluctant to give any information, Daniel casually quips, “I can always go and eat with some other dude and hang you up to the ceiling.” At this point Ammar reveals the name of Osama Bin Laden’s personal courier, Abu Ahmed, the man who eventually allows Maya to locate Osama Bin Laden in the following years.<sup>142</sup> Although Ammar is not being physically tortured at the moment in which he reveals this essential information, Boal’s assertion that torture did not lead to this breakthrough is not only a misleading, but an inaccurate claim.

In a later scene, the camera lingers on demonstrators outside the United States Embassy in Pakistan, taking part in a protest against the deaths of those killed by American drone strikes in the region. The protesters are portrayed as a violent and aggressive hord of Arabs and it is revealed that inside the embassy, the protests have forced the CIA to relocate its station chief Joseph Bradley, played by Kyle Chandler, ironically presenting Bradley as the victim of the protests--rather than the thousands of civilians killed or wounded in American drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004. These attacks have been so contentious that in June 2010, the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a report suggesting that the United States was the “most

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<sup>142</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Columbia Pictures. 2012. DVD

prolific user of targeted killings” in the world.<sup>143</sup> The antagonistic portrayal of the protesters denies their cause any legitimacy, providing another example of a historical and contextual inaccuracy in the film.

*Zero Dark Thirty* offers its perspective through not only an American point-of-view, but through the specialized scope of the CIA. In the film, the CIA operatives are diverse in gender and ethnicity, proving to be ethical, intelligent, industrious, and above all else, patriotic. Within the film, Maya survives two separate attacks, one at the Marriott Hotel bombing in Islamabad on September 20, 2008 and later in an assassination attempt outside her residence in Pakistan. In a later scene, Maya’s colleague and friend Jessica is one of the several CIA operatives killed during the Camp Chapman suicide attack in 2009. Scene after scene, the film portrays violent acts perpetrated against Americans, not by Americans, to remind the audience as to why the tortures and detainee program are necessary and justified in the first place.

In the film’s entirety, there is not one scene in which any character argues or expresses any doubt against torture or intelligence inefficiency at any point, even though this was a subject of debate both inside and outside the CIA at this time. When Daniel begins to blame himself for the Saudi attack, it is because he believes he was unable to secure the necessary information from Ammar, rather than the possibility that perhaps the torture process itself was ineffective.<sup>144</sup> The film also erases from its narrative those who resigned from their positions on the belief that the torture and detainee program were either unethical, immoral, illegal, or unreliable, such as FBI director Robert Mueller who chose to remove his staff rather than participate in the harsh

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<sup>143</sup> Cloud, David S. "U.N. Report Faults Prolific Use of Drone Strikes by U.S." Los Angeles Times. June 03, 2010. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/03/world/la-fg-cia-drones-20100603>.

<sup>144</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*.

and illegal treatment of prisoners.<sup>145</sup> There is no mention of the more than one hundred detainees who died in captivity, or the frequent failures of misinformation from prisoners, such as the false information gained from the torture of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi which was used to make an inaccurate case for the war in Iraq.<sup>146</sup> In the world that *Zero Dark Thirty* has created, everyone who is tortured has essential information that is vital to American national security.

The only scene in which the film offers anything resembling a dissenting voice is on a television in the background of a CIA meeting where President Barack Obama can be seen giving one of his first post-election interviews for *60 Minutes*. The audience can hear Obama say, "I have said repeatedly that America doesn't torture. And I'm gonna make sure that we don't torture." The operatives at the meeting feign slight sighs, and as the detainee program is brought to an end by Obama, CIA supervisor George criticizes Obama's decision as ineffective and Daniel warns Maya, "You don't wanna be the last one holding a dog collar when the oversight committee comes."<sup>147</sup> When Kathryn Bigelow was asked about the challenge of portraying torture in her film she insisted:

As a lifelong pacifist, I support all protests against the use of torture, and, quite simply, inhumane treatment of any kind. But I do wonder if some of the sentiments alternately expressed about the film might be more appropriately directed at those who instituted and ordered these U.S. policies, as opposed to a motion picture that brings the story to the screen. Those of us who work in the arts know that depiction is not endorsement. If it was, no artist would be able to paint inhumane practices, no author could write about them, and no filmmaker could delve into the thorny subjects of our time... Bin Laden wasn't defeated by superheroes zooming down from the sky; he was defeated by ordinary Americans who fought bravely even as they *sometimes* crossed moral lines, who labored greatly and intently, who gave all of themselves in both victory and defeat, in life and in

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<sup>145</sup> "Inquiry Clears FBI in Harsh Interrogations." CNN. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/05/20/fbi.interrogations/index.html>.

<sup>146</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 43.

<sup>147</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*.



death, for the defense of this nation.<sup>148</sup>

Yet, the criticism of the film was not whether or not the film *should* have depicted torture, but rather *how* it was depicted. Discussing Bigelow's and Boal's historical revision of torture, Peter Maas argued that the film, "represents a troubling new frontier of government embedded filmmaking."<sup>149</sup> Collaborations between the CIA and Hollywood are of little news, as this relationship has existed for decades, however, *Zero Dark Thirty* was made with close cooperation.

In a 2013 declassified CIA document, it was revealed that the CIA successfully pressured screenwriter Mark Boal to remove certain scenes from the film's script, some of which that might have cast the agency in a negative light. Under a United States Freedom of Information Act request, details emerged that five conference calls were held in late 2011 between Boal and the CIA's staff in the Office of Public Affairs "to help promote an appropriate portrayal of the agency and the Bin Laden operation".<sup>150</sup> Upon agency request, several elements of the screenplay's draft were changed. In the initial screenplay, Maya is actively participating in the waterboarding of Ammar, but after the later requested changes, Maya is instead, an observer.<sup>151</sup> Additionally, upon CIA insistence, scenes in which a dog assists in an interrogation and an additional scene in which agents party on a rooftop in Islamabad, drinking and shooting off an AK-47 in celebration were also removed. These changes were made despite the documented use

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<sup>148</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 42.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Child, Ben. "CIA Requested Zero Dark Thirty Rewrites, Memo Reveals." *The Guardian*. May 07, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/may/07/zero-dark-thirty-cia-memo>.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

of aggressive dogs in American interrogations of terror suspects at Guantánamo Bay and the released photos of dogs menacing naked prisoners during the Abu Ghraib scandal. In an additional document released concerning this relationship between the CIA and Boal, a CIA staff member wrote, “[Boal] agreed to share scripts and details about the movie with us so we're absolutely comfortable with what he will be showing.”<sup>152</sup> However, denying the CIA’s interference on his creative process, Boal responded, “We honoured certain requests to keep operational details and the identity of the participants confidential, but as with any publication or work of art, the final decisions as to the content were made by the film-makers.”<sup>153</sup>

Despite the CIA’s admission of collaboration and Boal’s rebuttal, *Zero Dark Thirty*’s climax culminates with the raid on the Bin Laden compound in Abbottabad, a mission only possible as the film depicts, through intelligence gained by the use of torture. Maya informs the audience, “*I’m gonna smoke everyone involved in this op [the Camp Chapman attack], then I am gonna kill Bin Laden.*” Maya’s moral certainty is embodied in the righteousness of her drive, neatly articulated as she declares, “A lot of my friends have died trying to do this. I believe I was spared so I could finish the job.”<sup>154</sup> This sentiment was similarly shared as United States Attorney General Eric Holder called the mission, “lawful, legitimate, and appropriate in every way”, and was reverberated by President Obama himself claiming that “justice had been done.”

<sup>155</sup> In the film, when bin Laden is successfully assassinated, one of the acting Navy SEALs transmits the message, “For God and Country”, the agreed confirmation signal to inform the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*.

<sup>155</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 42.

authorities of bin Laden's death, the message which was also the initial title of the film. In the final scenes Maya is asked to identify bin Laden's body. Unzipping the bag, Maya inspects the face of the body inside, but it is not shown to the audience, nor is bin Laden's face shown during the raid, emphasizing that in this film bin Laden functions as a symbol rather than an individual person. Shortly after, Maya boards a large plane where she is the only passenger. The pilot asks her, "Where do you wanna go?" and the camera cuts to its last shot, an extended close-up of Maya's face as she silently cries for nearly a minute.



(Figure 4)<sup>156</sup>

Maya's tears are shrouded with ambiguity. What is she crying for? The victims of 9/11 or the victims of the war on terror? The deaths of her American friends and colleagues? Are they tears of relief from the mission she dedicated so many years to? Regarding this final scene

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<sup>156</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Jessica Chastain commented, “To end the film on that question is far more interesting than providing an answer.”<sup>157</sup> Despite this singular concluding moment of ambiguity, and despite Bigelow’s and Boal’s objections, the remainder of *Zero Dark Thirty* averted any sense of ambiguity in its narrative, providing a specific and distinct procedural timeline of events leading to bin Laden’s assassination. Regardless of the film’s explicit claims towards its own undeniable accuracy, *Zero Dark Thirty* largely misremembers and reinterprets the war on terror, providing an interpretative narrative of revenge and justification. Just as American culture has selectively rewritten and forgotten undisputed truths of our collective history--such as the erasure of the genocide of Native Americans, the use of the atomic bomb in Japan, the internment of Japanese-American citizens, and attempts to rewrite the Vietnam War as a noble failure-- *Zero Dark Thirty* lacks its own historical and contextual self-awareness. Acknowledging the influence of cinematic power on the American memory, United States Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), John McCain (R-AZ), and Carl Levin (D-MI) wrote an open letter to Sony Pictures in December 2012 in which they expressed their fear that *Zero Dark Thirty* “has the potential to shape American public opinion in a disturbing and misleading manner.”<sup>158</sup>

Senator Feinstein, in particular, was especially outspoken on the film. Serving as the former head of the United States Senate Investigations Committee which spent six years investigating the CIA’s now defunct detention and interrogation program, Feinstein said in an interview with *PBS*, “I walked out of *Zero Dark Thirty*, candidly... I couldn’t handle it. Because

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<sup>157</sup> McSweeney, Terence. *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 44.

<sup>158</sup> Shane, Scott. "Senators Say Torture Scenes in Movie on Bin Laden Hunt Are Misleading." *The New York Times*. December 20, 2012. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/us/senators-say-zero-dark-thirty-torture-scenes-are-misleading.html>.

it is so false." Feinstein also confirmed that waterboarding and other harsh techniques were “not central” in developing the clues that led to Osama bin Laden’s hideout.<sup>159</sup> Released in 2014, in a report compiled by the bipartisan United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI), details the use of enhanced torture techniques during the CIA detention and interrogation program, in which Feinstein also served as the committee’s chair. In the 6,000 page document the following findings and conclusions that were made by the committee include:

- #1: The CIA's use of its enhanced interrogation techniques was not an effective means of acquiring intelligence or gaining cooperation from detainees. The Committee finds, based on a review of CIA interrogation records, that the use of the CIA's enhanced interrogation techniques was not an effective means of obtaining accurate information or gaining detainee cooperation. For example, according to CIA records, seven of the 39 CIA detainees known to have been subjected to the CIA's enhanced interrogation techniques produced no intelligence while in CIA custody... While being subjected to the CIA's enhanced interrogation techniques and afterwards, multiple CIA detainees fabricated information, resulting in faulty intelligence. Detainees provided fabricated information on critical intelligence issues, including the terrorist threats which the CIA identified as its highest priorities.
- #16: The CIA failed to adequately evaluate the effectiveness of its enhanced interrogation Techniques. The CIA never conducted a credible, comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of its enhanced interrogation techniques, despite a recommendation by the CIA inspector general and similar requests by the national security advisor and the leadership of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.<sup>160</sup>

Even though the official SSCI report was released to the public two years after the release of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the findings in the report include assessments and concerns that politicians and CIA operatives had been openly expressing for years. However, with its CIA tampered script and its depiction of the details of torture and its results, *Zero Dark Thirty* is a misguided portrayal of

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<sup>159</sup> Child, Ben. "CIA Requested Zero Dark Thirty Rewrites, Memo Reveals." The Guardian. May 07, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/may/07/zero-dark-thirty-cia-memo>.

<sup>160</sup> "Senate Torture Report - FOIA." American Civil Liberties Union. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.aclu.org/cases/senate-torture-report-foia>.

American foreign policy, reinforcing misleading propaganda rather than challenging it. As journalist Michael Isikoff tells in his documentary, *Secrets, Politics and Lies* (2015), produced by PBS, Hollywood movies have a significant impact: "More people see them, and more people get their impressions about what happened from a movie like that than they do from countless news stories, or TV spots."<sup>161</sup>

The concerns voiced by the American senators who wrote their open letter to Sony Pictures and Isikoff are valid. *Zero Dark Thirty* reached a wider segment of the American public than any other film about Iraq and Osama Bin Laden released before it, grossing \$95.7 million at the box office. The film generated further attention at the 2012 Academy Awards, where it was nominated for five Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Actress for Chastain, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Film Editing, and winning the award for Best Sound Editing.<sup>162</sup> While film critics voiced criticism of the movie due to its political implications regarding torture, *Zero Dark Thirty* received universal acclaim. *The New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis, who designated the film a New York Times critics' pick, said that the film "shows the dark side of that war. It shows the unspeakable and lets us decide if the death of Bin Laden was worth the price we paid."

<sup>163</sup>Critic Katey Rich of The Guardian said: "Telling a nearly three-hour story with an ending everyone knows, Bigelow and Boal have managed to craft one of the most intense and

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<sup>161</sup> "Secrets, Politics and Torture." PBS. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/secrets-politics-and-torture/transcript/>.

<sup>162</sup> "Zero Dark Thirty (2012)." Box Office Mojo. Accessed April 11, 2018.

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=binladen.htm>.

<sup>163</sup> Dargis, Manohla. "By Any Means Necessary." *The New York Times*. December 17, 2012. Accessed April 11, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/18/movies/jessica-chastain-in-zero-dark-thirty.html>.

intellectually challenging films of the year."<sup>164</sup> Calling *Zero Dark Thirty* "a milestone in post-Sept. 11 cinema", critic A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* listed the film at number six of the top 10 films of 2012.<sup>165</sup>

As demonstrated by *Zero Dark Thirty* American audiences enthusiastically welcomed films that praise our country's acumen and courage in the face of a pervasive and undeniably evil enemy. Released in 2014, Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* is the most recent financially successful as well as popular film released about the war on terror. Infact, *American Sniper* is the highest grossing war film both in the United States, and worldwide (breaking *Saving Private Ryan*'s record), earning \$350 million domestically.<sup>166</sup> Based off of the memoir written by Chris Kyle by the same title, the film follows Kyle, played by Bradley Cooper, as he completes four tours of duty in the Iraq war, becoming the deadliest marksman in American military history.<sup>167</sup> As the film begins, we see Kyle as a young boy as he is taught by his father how to shoot a rifle and hunt deer. In a later scene, after the U.S. embassy bombings in 1998, Kyle enlists in the Navy and becomes a Navy SEALs sniper. He meets and marries a woman named Taya, played by Sienna Miller, and after the 9/11 attacks, Kyle is deployed to Iraq.

In the first of many terse scenes, Kyle scores his first kills, a woman and young boy who try and attack the American Marines with a Russian RKG-3 anti-tank grenade. Kyle is visibly upset by the experience, but as he is faced with numerous similar situations, he earns the

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<sup>164</sup> Bradshaw, Peter. "Zero Dark Thirty – Review." *The Guardian*. January 24, 2013. Accessed April 11, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jan/24/zero-dark-thirty-review>.

<sup>165</sup> Scott, A. O. "A. O. Scott's 25 Best Films of 2012." *The New York Times*. December 14, 2012. Accessed April 11, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/movies/a-o-scotts-25-best-films-of-2012.html>.

<sup>166</sup> *American Sniper* (2014). (n.d.). Retrieved April 11, 2018, from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=americansniper.htm>

<sup>167</sup> *American Sniper*. Directed by Clint Eastwood. Warner Bros. Pictures. 2014. DVD

nickname “The Legend” for his many hits. Later, Kyle receives an assignment to hunt for the al-Qaeda leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. After interrogating a family, Kyle and his squad mates are led to al-Zarqawi’s second in command, a man known as “The Butcher”. The mission goes awry when The Butcher captures the father and his son from whom Kyle and his men received their essential information. The Butcher ruthlessly kills the innocent father and son while Kyle is pinned down by a sniper, known as Mustafa--an Olympic Games medalist from Syria.

Meanwhile, the insurgents issue a bounty on Kyle.<sup>168</sup>

Kyle returns home after his first tour to his loving wife and newborn son but he is distracted by his experiences down range and disillusioned by domestic life (echoing the same narrative discussed earlier in regards to William James in *The Hurt Locker*). He returns to Iraq for a second tour, eventually helping kill The Butcher in a shootout. On his third tour, Mustafa injures a member of Kyle’s unit and another fellow soldier is killed. Each time Kyle returns home from his tour he grows increasingly distant from his family. During his fourth and final tour, Kyle is assigned to kill Mustafa, who has been sniping U.S. Army combat engineers as they build a barricade. Placed on a rooftop inside enemy territory, Kyle spots Mustafa and takes him out with a risky long distance shot, but ultimately reveals his team's position to numerous armed insurgents. In the midst of a firefight, a sandstorm provides cover for a chaotic escape in which Kyle is injured and almost left behind.<sup>169</sup>

Kyle returns home and his inability to adjust to civilian life has worsened. He is haunted by survivor’s guilt and PTSD, receiving psychiatric help from a Veteran Affairs doctor. Upon the psychiatrist’s suggestion, he is encouraged to volunteer to help the wounded veterans in the VA

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.



hospital and gradually begins to adjust to his life at home with his family. Seemingly happy and in good spirits, some years later on February 2, 2013, Kyle says a quick goodbye to his wife and family as he leaves to go spend time with a veteran at a shooting range. The screen cuts to a black shot, the words in white revealing, "Chris Kyle was killed that day by a veteran he was trying to help." The film concludes with archive footage of crowds standing along the highway for his funeral procession and memorial service.<sup>170</sup>

By the time of *American Sniper*'s release in 2014, the Iraq war remained largely unpopular amongst the American public. Even as the cinematic version of Chris Kyle delivered lines stressing the importance of fighting the Iraq war, Americans who disagreed with Kyle's pro-war stance bought tickets to the film anyways. While at the time of the film's release Americans did not necessarily like the Iraq war, they do like war narratives that remind them comfortably of action movies. The film memorializes Kyle as a hero; he is extraordinarily bulky, speaks with a quintessential Texan drawl, and possesses an almost superhuman marksman ability. His recurring super-sniper enemy Mustafa, is clad in all black and in the scene where The Butcher kills the father and son, The Butcher takes a power drill to the innocent boy's skull. It is a harrowing and intense scene, and there is nothing but absolute evil in The Butcher's eyes.<sup>171</sup> While the film initially does attempt to portray scenes in which Kyle has a difficult time making kills, scenes like this erase any doubt that the enemy, be it man, woman, or child, is a malevolent villain, or at least a dangerous threat.

*American Sniper* received mixed reviews amongst critics. Calling it a "terrorploitation shoot-em-up" flick, Noah Berlatsky, writing for *The Guardian* added, "*American Sniper*'s

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

simplistic hero-worshipping shoot-em-up fits neatly into the simplistic, hero-worshipping tropes of standard Hollywood adrenaline-junkie fare.”<sup>172</sup> Chris Nashawaty of *Entertainment Weekly* gave the film a C+, saying “The film's just a repetition of context-free combat missions and one-dimensional targets.”<sup>173</sup> David Denby of *The New Yorker* gave the film a positive review, saying “Both a devastating war movie and a devastating antiwar movie, a subdued celebration of a warrior's skill and a sorrowful lament over his alienation and misery.”<sup>174</sup> In A. O. Scott’s review for the *New York Times* he wrote, “Less a war movie than a western — the story of a lone gunslinger facing down his nemesis in a dusty, lawless place — it is blunt and effective, though also troubling.”<sup>175</sup>

In response to critics, Clint Eastwood answered, “the fact of what [war] does to the family and the people who have to go back into civilian life like Chris Kyle did,” is the “biggest anti-war statement any film” can make.<sup>176</sup> Eastwood later stated:

I was a child growing up during World War II. That was supposed to be the one to end all wars. And four years later, I was standing at the draft board being drafted during the Korean conflict, and then after that there was Vietnam, and it goes on and on forever ... I just wonder ... does this ever stop? And no, it doesn't. So each time we get in these

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<sup>172</sup> Berlatsky, Noah. “Hollywood's War on Terror: Why Audiences Prefer Gung-ho Iraq Films.” *The Guardian*. November 21, 2016. Accessed April 11, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/nov/21/ang-lee-billy-lynns-long-halftime-walk-iraw-war-films-american-sniper>.

<sup>173</sup> “American Sniper.” *EW.com*. Accessed April 11, 2018.

<http://ew.com/article/2014/12/25/american-sniper/>.

<sup>174</sup> Denby, David. “Living History.” *The New Yorker*. December 22, 2014. Accessed April 11, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/22/living-history>.

<sup>175</sup> Scott, A. O. “Review: ‘American Sniper,’ a Clint Eastwood Film With Bradley Cooper.” *The New York Times*. December 24, 2014. Accessed April 11, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/movies/american-sniper-a-clint-eastwood-film-starring-bradley-cooper.html>.

<sup>176</sup> “Is ‘American Sniper’ an Anti-war Film?” *The Christian Science Monitor*. January 26, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2018. <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2015/0126/Is-American-Sniper-an-anti-war-film>.

conflicts, it deserves a lot of thought before we go wading in or wading out. Going in or coming out. It needs a better thought process, I think.<sup>177</sup>

Responding to his own critics, Bradley Cooper countered, “We looked at hopefully igniting attention about the lack of care that goes to vets. [Any] discussion that has nothing to do with vets, or what we did or did not do [for them], every conversation in those terms is moving farther and farther from what our soldiers go through, and the fact that 22 veterans commit suicide each day.”<sup>178</sup> Even so, despite Eastwood and Cooper’s arguments, *American Sniper* spent little time depicting Kyle in civilian life.

The two films discussed in this category are not only the most recent films produced about the aftermath of 9/11 and the war on terror, but also the highest grossing. Already six years since *Zero Dark Thirty* was released and four years since the release of *American Sniper*, time has passed and it does not appear that films concerning any of the same subject matter are due for release or production in the immediate future. For now, it seems as if Hollywood is signing off from releasing any more cinematic features that directly portray the events of 9/11, Osama bin Laden, the Iraq war, or even Afghanistan, even though the war in Afghanistan is still ongoing. These films performed well at the Academy Awards, grossed substantial box office earnings, and reached the widest segment of American audiences out of any movies that directly concerned the war on terror. It makes sense to end things on a good note. However, if Hollywood

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<sup>177</sup> Howell, Peter. "Think before You Shoot, Clint Eastwood Says of War: Interview." Thestar.com. January 13, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2018. [https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2015/01/13/think\\_before\\_you\\_shoot\\_clint\\_eastwood\\_says\\_of\\_war\\_interview.html](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2015/01/13/think_before_you_shoot_clint_eastwood_says_of_war_interview.html).

<sup>178</sup> Buckley, Cara. "Bradley Cooper Says 'American Sniper' Debate Ignores Plight of Veterans." The New York Times. February 02, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2018. [https://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/bradley-cooper-says-american-sniper-debate-ignores-plight-of-veterans/?\\_r=0](https://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/bradley-cooper-says-american-sniper-debate-ignores-plight-of-veterans/?_r=0).

intends on closing its cinematic war on terror chapter for now, it is important to discuss these implications. Perhaps with more time, distance, and rumination Hollywood will return to these subjects again, but maybe, as the distance from these events grows and Americans become more disconnected with the wars in which we fight, the potential for any ensuing films becomes not only unprofitable, but of little interest to American audiences. While cinema is often knocked by the epithet “it’s only a movie”, what is a more dynamic cultural artifact than that of popular and mainstream film?

Neither *Zero Dark Thirty* or *American Sniper* actively challenged the war on terror, but rather, in their visions of a warrior’s heroism and the righteousness of military intelligence, they not only endorsed but widely legitimized the war on terror, where the ends justify the means. When we see a movie, we understand that what we are about to see is a work of cinematic fiction. However, both *Zero Dark Thirty* is and *American Sniper* are cinematic renderings of well known narratives. *Zero Dark Thirty* opens under the pretense of “Based on Firsthand Accounts of Actual Events” and *American Sniper* is the cinematic portrayal of Chris Kyle’s *New York Times* best-selling memoir. Both films depict stories that viewers are likely already familiar with and the audience gets the impression that what they are about to see on screen is not only factual, but of privileged intelligence. In these films, the distinction between fact and fiction is heavily blurred, yet their sensationalized accounts resonate with audiences.

In these films, the Arab enemy is certainly villainous. There is no pretext to their origin stories, and the true victims of the war on terror are the Americans. Clint Eastwood was certainly correct in acknowledging the anti-war message found in the consequences that war has on families and soldiers--but while the pain and suffering of American troops is not only real but

also tragic, it is a peculiar thing to award such sympathy only to Americans and not the thousands of Iraqi and Afghan civilians who have died from war related causes since America's invasion. This prevailing interpretation of American victimization and the erasure of other's suffering only exacerbates sentiments of American exceptionalism and moral conviction.

Although imperialism is a term Americans tend to exempt themselves from, our grand cinematic misadventure in Iraq and Afghanistan is just that: a sensational misadventure in imperial benevolence.

## Conclusion

It is not shocking news to say that movies reflect the social world in which we live in. They do not reflect it perfectly however. The study of film does not fit neatly into the discipline of history nor other social sciences. On one hand, movies may be conceptualized as independent variables, cultural stimuli that seek to address and modify political attitudes and behaviors of the audience and society. On the other hand, some films--particularly those of financial success--seem to be *caused* by the external social and political conditions of the time. Here, these films assume an active life of their own, interacting both with politics and social spheres. As political scientist Phillip Gianos notes, “politics and movies inform each other... Both tell about the society from which they come.”<sup>179</sup> Thus the political analysis of film takes on a highly qualitative approach and the relationship between movies and its politics is highly nuanced.

The relationship between society and art is generally referred to as reflection theory. This theory is a relatively passive view of the media's effect that hold, according to Herbert Gans, “the prime function of the media is to reinforce already existing behavior and attitudes rather than create them.”<sup>180</sup> Still, this *is* a form of socialization, where the cultural object reinforces existing attitudes and values, serving to strengthen these same beliefs. Thus, according to the reflection theory, movies function as a window into a world that allows the viewer to gain insight into social sentiments. In the reflective metaphor, the artistic content (film) is viewed as a mirror into a group's values (popular ideologies). John Wayne's financially successful film, *The Green Berets* (1968), largely a propagandic movie invoking “the good war”, is a reminder that many

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<sup>179</sup> Gianos, Phillip, *Politics and Politicians in American Film*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1995.

<sup>180</sup> Markert, John. *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011. p. 54

Americans still viewed the Vietnam war in a positive light, even though it was released after the Tet Offensive in January of the same year.<sup>181</sup> Where Tet is largely regarded as the point in which American public opinion regarding American involvement in Vietnam began to shift, it is not as clear as to when the public mood shifted regarding American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. After all, Bush swept the 2004 presidential race, indicating not only his popularity but a message from the American people to “stay the course”.<sup>182</sup>

While films may reflect society and provide a glimpse into popularly held beliefs, it is important to note that a film’s message may be distorted to reflect the values of filmmakers or those vested interest groups that produce or collaborate of the film. Continuing the metaphor of reflection, this aspect of film theory is better understood as refraction theory since the film’s point of view tends to refract the values and beliefs of the espousing group.<sup>183</sup> Within refraction theory, the film’s message may be taken as reality by the viewer and recurrent exposure to the film’s message may not only reinforce existing attitudes, but shape them as well. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, social attitudes were strongly behind the president but attitudes began to change in the following years when the war on terror dragged on, Taliban forces were becoming even more belligerent in Afghanistan, troops failed to find Osama Bin Laden, and no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq.

The first major cinematic outburst against the war was fired in 2004 by Michael Moore with his documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Criticizing the Bush administration, the media, and

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<sup>181</sup> Ibis. p. 19.

<sup>182</sup> Ibis. p. 11.

<sup>183</sup> Jung, Berenike. *Narrating Violence in Post-9/11 Action Cinema: Terrorist Narratives, Cinematic Narration, and Referentiality*. Wiesbaden: VS, Verlag Für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010. p. 119

the war on terror, *Fahrenheit 9/11* clearly takes on a pontificated liberal stance. The documentary was followed by two conservative rebuttal films, *Michael Moore Hates America* (2004) and *FahrenHYPE 9/11* (2004), however the financial success of Moore's original documentary, still currently the highest grossing documentary film of all time, might reflect the changing social attitudes towards the war.<sup>184</sup> While it is impossible to quantitatively measure the impact that a film has on social attitudes, political films can certainly help inflame the debate by keeping the issue alive in the public arena.

Hollywood was not particularly quick to exploit the terrorist attacks of 9/11, but their release was inevitable. The first crop of big-feature films to portray the actual attacks of September 11 were not released until 2006 with the films *World Trade Center* and *United 93*. In addition to these films' cinematic depiction of bombastic carnage, both movies memorialize the heroic efforts and courage of those Americans who lost their lives in the attacks. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011) was later released, functioning to portray 9/11's devastating aftermath on American families. As American cinema began to reckon with the events of 9/11, it is important to note that amongst these three films there is no political or historical context concerning the attacks of 9/11. These films at no point, seek to answer the questions of *why*? While the cinematic depiction of American suffering and heroism no doubt deserves its day at the movies, these films ultimately reaffirm the belief that the attacks were unprovoked.

Through the selective silencing of the past, this mythologized cinematic vision of 9/11 contributes to our own willful amnesia. In polling right after the 9/11 attacks, asking open ended

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<sup>184</sup> Markert, John. *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011. p. 60.



questions about who carried them out, only 3 percent mentioned Iraq or Hussein. But by January of 2003, 44 percent of Americans reported that either “most” or “some” of the 9/11 hijackers were Iraqi citizens.<sup>185</sup> Later in June 2007, polls revealed 41 percent of Americans still believed Hussein was involved in planning or financing 9/11, while 30 percent believed weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq.<sup>186</sup> Even though an independent joint congressional commission report released in 2003 concluded that U.S. intelligence had zero evidence linking Saddam Hussein to the 9/11 attacks or to Al Qaeda, Americans continued to believe otherwise. The discourse coming from the White House contributed to these false memories. Memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus has confirmed how easy it is to “distort” or “plant false memories.”<sup>187</sup> Many factors including the opinions of authority figures, information repeated in the culture, the emotional intensity of the event, or an individual’s internal desire to conform, all contribute to what Loftus calls “post-event information”-- ideas and suggestions introduced after an event that are integrated into memory, modifying beliefs in what individuals saw, heard, or experienced. Over time, integrating post-event information with information gathered at the time of the event can combine into one seamless memory.<sup>188</sup>

What does it mean for a culture to remember? In Judith Butler’s book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, she writes: “Most Americans have probably experienced something like the loss of their First Worldism as a result of the events of September 11 and its

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<sup>185</sup> "The Impact of Bush Linking 9/11 and Iraq." The Christian Science Monitor. March 14, 2003. Accessed April 11, 2018. <https://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0314/p02s01-woiq.html>.

<sup>186</sup> Braiker, Brian. "Poll: What Americans (Don't) Know." Newsweek. August 23, 2010. Accessed April 11, 2018. <http://www.newsweek.com/poll-what-americans-dont-know-100099>.

<sup>187</sup> Spinney, Laura. "'We Can Implant Entirely False Memories'." The Guardian. December 04, 2003. Accessed April 11, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2003/dec/04/science.research1>.

<sup>188</sup> Ibis.

aftermath.”<sup>189</sup> Butler continues, writing, “The United States was supposed to be the place that could not be attacked. . . where the only violence we knew was the kind we inflicted on ourselves.” In post-9/11 film, there is a continuum of failing to recognize or portray the essential humanity of other lives except our own. In films charting the war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, these films have continuously failed to discuss the victims who are not Americans. The costs of our wars to the population of civilians and enemy soldiers are rarely found amongst the essential cinematic narratives of American post-9/11 film. These films grant American privilege through their subjectivity and focus on our humanity and moral authority at the expense of these Others. As American cinema continues to overtly exclude any narratives in suffering of non-Westerners, this maintains the notion that life outside the First World is not as valuable and not as human as ours. This ideological construction of “otherness” is demonstrated in Peter Davis’s Vietnam War documentary *Hearts and Minds* (1974) when General William Westmoreland articulated that, “The Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does a westerner.”<sup>190</sup> This reductive stereotype was echoed in 2004 when President Bush commented, “Today, if you noticed, there was a car bomb near a school. These people are brutal. They - they’re the exact opposite if Americans. We value life and human dignity. They don’t care about life and human dignity. We believe in freedom. They have an ideology of hate.”<sup>191</sup> In tandem, the large majority of perspectives represented in post-9/11 cinema encourage empathetic responses to American suffering, failing to include the marginalized lives of the other.

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<sup>189</sup> Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2006.

<sup>190</sup> *Hearts and Minds*. Directed by Peter Davis. United States: Produced by Bert Schneider and Peter Davis, 1974.

<sup>191</sup> Bush, George W. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, Office of the Federal Register, 2010.

Of course, there was at least one cinematic attempt to portray the plight of Arab civilians in the war on terror. As previously discussed, *Redacted* (2007) is a fictitious portrayal of the controversial Mahmudiyah killings, depicting the rape and murder of a young Iraqi girl and her family by American soldiers. Director Brian De Palma, who has created some of the most emblematic American films of the 20th century, stated in an interview, “everybody screamed at me about [*Redacted*], but it’s amazing to me that there isn’t more of that. I guess there are films dealing with sexuality and climate change. But the war machine is non-stop... Where are the American political films? We’ve been at war for 10 or 15 years now. Where’s the outrage?”<sup>192</sup> De Palma’s *Redacted* was not only met with harsh criticism by the mainstream media, but was met with the lowest box office gross out of all of the films this thesis discussed. In the same year that *Redacted* was released, *In the Valley of Elah* grossed incredibly low as well. The general lack of financial success that met these films reflects the sentiment that at the time of their release, American audiences were not prepared to embrace such supposedly anti-American films, especially films that tarnished the image of American troops.

The war on terror as depicted by Hollywood was still of enough interest to the American public, so long as they avoided any hardline political or moral statements. *The Hurt Locker* was released a year later in 2008, and the film *Brothers* was released the following year. These films occupied a seemingly neutral political territory while portraying American troops as the victims of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. With their tempered politics, these films depict issues such as the effects trauma on American soldiers and their feelings of disillusionment upon their return.

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<sup>192</sup> Kohn, Eric. "Brian De Palma: Why He'll Never Work in Hollywood Or on Television Again." IndieWire. June 02, 2016. Accessed April 11, 2018. <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/06/brian-de-palma-documetary-hollywood-tv-noah-baumbach-jake-paltrow-1201683547/>.

These films managed to reach a wider general audience amongst Americans as compared to the politically antagonistic films of the previous category.

Breaking off from films that directly tackle the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, films that exploit these conflicts in attempt to sensationalize current events began to be released starting in 2008. Crossing the genres of romance, thriller, comedy, action, and superhero, these films superimposed their plots, dropping their characters off into the worlds of Iraq and Afghanistan. In this category, such films include: *Body of Lies* (2008), *Iron Man* (2008), *Dear John* (2010), *The Lucky One* (2012), and *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016). These films churned out a substantial gross at the box office, reaching the widest audience out of the film categories that preceded them. However, even seemingly apolitical films operate in an auxiliary political manner. While these films contain no political or historical context to their narratives, they contribute in assuming the ideology of a “just war”. They contain no distinguishable political criticism and capitalize on the war on terror for their own theatrical advantage. They present a war without consequence, further reaffirming the victimization of Americans, and denying narratives to Arab and Muslim peoples. Here, Iraq and Afghanistan become, somehow, the perfect place for a superhero’s genesis story, quirky comedies, spy thrillers, and romantic dramas. What a privilege Hollywood is awarded in being able to exploit the war on terror, injecting jokes, romance, suspense, absurdity, and silliness into our foreign conflicts without even a single mention of consequence.

Apart from these exploitative films, and despite waning public support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the films about the war on terror that were released between 2012 and 2014 earned the highest box office gross and were met with highly positive critical acclaim. Both

*American Sniper* (2014) *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) are arguably the most significant American films of the post-9/11 era in regards to the war on terror (one could appropriately include *The Hurt Locker* as well). Within this category, neither *Zero Dark Thirty* nor *American Sniper* actively challenge the war on terror. These films depict an undisputed vision of American military heroism and righteousness, superior intelligence, and a binary worldview of good and evil. Our heroes are memorialized and canonized and the audience is entertained.

Currently, Hollywood is not working on any more films that directly address either wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. Because of these films' successes, it appears as if Hollywood and American audiences are satisfied with this cinematic chapter of the war on terror. However, as previously discussed, it is important to note that the defining films of the Vietnam War such as *Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) were not released until after the Vietnam War ended, and were released more than twenty to thirty years after the war began. Perhaps the war on terror equivalent to these films has yet to be made--and whether they will is uncertain. But for now, and considering the most recent chapter in which Hollywood has ended on, it is imperative to evaluate these implication.

In the chaos and confusion of 9/11 and its subsequent conflicts, there is a desperate need to wrap the experience into a simple and digestible narrative. With some exceptions, Hollywood has administered the production of jingoistic revenge fantasies in which American audiences are able to exercise our post-9/11 demons, watching the countless slaughter of onscreen jihadis by the hands of righteous American heroes. American audiences do not want to see a film that sympathizes with our overseas enemies, gives historical context to the 9/11 attacks, bashes our troops, questions our politicians' competence, or challenges our nation's moral convictions. As

filmmakers dramatize these historical events they produce an uncritical, unreflective narrative of American victimization, a pronounced disconnection from the geopolitical arena, an erasure of political and historical context, and a denial of representation to the civilians who have been killed or displaced from the countries where in which we wage our wars.

Movies may not change a country but they contribute. They inform and educate, provide catharsis, act out our worries and fantasies--they make us feel less alone. Despite their mildness and reassurance, their constant social criticism can help keep us self-conscious as a nation. They have told us to rely on leaders and heros for salvation, ignored the alternative of collective action, and neglect or condemn opinions that stray from the mainstream. Although it may seem unjustified to single out American mainstream film for failing to provide context, they share a conspicuous detachment from responsibility and consequence. Upon analysis, films that emerged in American mainstream regarding 9/11 and Iraq and Afghanistan provide a revealing interrogation of American fears and fantasies where the enemy is almost certainly Muslim or Arabic and in our reverie our politicians and soldiers are noble, clear-eyed warriors. At the very least, as writer Mark Lacey suggested, American cinema became “a space where ‘common sense’ ideas about global politics and history are reproduced and where stories about what is acceptable behavior from states and individuals are naturalized and legitimated.”<sup>193</sup> While it is enticing to dismiss cinema as harmless entertainment, saying “It’s only a movie”, this rejection only further reverberates our refracted self-image. American cinema, as André Bazin suggested,

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<sup>193</sup> Lacey, Mark. ‘War, cinema, and moral anxiety.’ *Alternatives*, 28 (2003). p. 611.

“has been able, in an extraordinarily competent way, to show American society just as it wanted to see itself.”<sup>194</sup>

America won its independence violently and has continued to exist and expand through selective but regular use of its military power, not always justified but usually approved by its people. Ultimately and ironically, a government dedicated to returning the world to peace following two World Wars attempted to achieve that goal by unleashing the most terrible weapon mankind had ever seen. As a result, there remains an apparent contradiction between the great emphasis that America has put on peace and the means it has used to preserve itself. Accordingly, as the United States mourned the 2,996 American lives that perished in the September 11 attacks, we have neglected to lament the hundreds of thousands of civilians that have died due to war related causes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Are Americans accountable for the damage their interventions have wrought, or free to leave to others the task of remedying the miseries they helped create? In regards to the films this thesis has discussed, I am inclined to agree with the latter. In its essence, and further emphasized by the films our country creates, America's war on terror is merely a misadventure in altruistic imperialism.

As I write this is 2018, the war in Afghanistan still continues as the longest American conflict in history. As President Donald Trump replays his mantra of “America first” it is unclear as to what the Trump administration's elusive policies towards Afghanistan actually are. As yellow journalism has evolved into “fake news”, sources of factual information have become only further muddled. Media coverage can be manipulated, film footage can be edited, and

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<sup>194</sup> Hillier, Jim. *Cahiers Du Cinéma, the 1950s: Neo-realism, Hollywood, New Wave*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. p. 251.

images can be photoshopped. The distinction between fact and fiction has become largely indistinguishable, where partisan parties accuse the other of conspiracy. Echoing the rhetoric of Orwell and Kafka, “alternative facts” have blurred our understandings of truth and dominance and our politics have no relation to morals. How Hollywood and the Pentagon continue to address modern conflicts and the chaos of facts remains to be seen. We can only hope that through collective democratic debate and artistic expression we may be able to demand transparency and accountability from those who govern us.



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